

# To Forgive Means To Forget – Hebrews 8:12 and Ephesians 4:32

## Introduction

We have all manner of well-worn sayings that all kind of say the same thing: **Forgive and forget**

Bury the hatchet; kiss and make up; let bygones be bygones; wipe the slate clean; grin and bear it – just to name a few

But many of us struggle with the idea of “forgive and forget” and letting the injuries we’ve endured flow on by like water under the bridge

The reality is that there are godly men and women who have things in their past that they have determined to forgive only to find that the mere mention of them, even years after the fact, causes unwanted feelings to bubble to the surface

And they realize that nothing has truly been forgotten, not really

And that realization results in feelings of guilt that they are not forgiving the way the Bible tells them they must

After all, when we read in **Ephesians 4:32** that we are to forgive as God forgives us

And passages like **Hebrews 8:12** tell us that God forgives and then remembers our sins no more

Guilt over our inadequacy is almost sure to be the result

And when **Matthew 6:14-15** tells us that God will not forgive the unforgiving person our guilt can turn to fear

Forgiveness is serious business

We know that forgiveness is expected of us – in fact, it’s a central part of Christianity

But, sadly, Christians by and large have not been shown what biblical forgiveness looks like

Consequently, there are many who believe that they have not truly forgiven someone if they haven’t also forgotten all about the offense that was committed

Actually, we generally tend to believe several falsehoods when it comes to forgiveness

That forgiveness means **pretending that nothing happened** or

That forgiveness is **a never-ending series of second chances for the offender** or

That forgiveness means **a fresh start with all the old baggage thrown overboard** or

That forgiveness means that **a damaged relationship must instantly and fully be restored along complete trust and access and privileges**

And, sometimes, we even believe that forgiveness means that **we literally must forget that what happened, happened**

Because that’s what we’ve been led to believe the Bible teaches

But once again, sometimes the things we know just ain’t so and this is one of them

Still, it seems clear that forgiveness is vitally important and that we must forgive others as God has forgiven us and that somehow the manner in which we forgive is tied to how we will be forgiven by God

So we know we need to clear away all the fog of what we think we know and find out what the Bible really has to say about the subject of forgiveness and how we should forgive those who sin against us

As we look to God’s Word this morning, we’ll start by asking, **“How does God forgive?”**

Then we’ll consider the question, **“How does God forget?”**

Then, lastly, we’ll attempt to answer the question, **“How must we forgive?”**

With that outline before us, let’s get started by looking at some truths about **how God forgives** that may have escaped our notice

## I. How does God forgive?

The reason God needs to forgive mankind in the first place is because of the fall of Adam recorded in Genesis 3

Adam and his wife, Eve, were placed sinless in the Garden of Eden and yet they chose to disobey God

Since that fateful day, all humans have been born with a corrupt sin nature and have been willfully sinning against God

But God loves us too much to let us remain separated from him so he provided a way for us to be forgiven

And that way, as we know, is through his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ

That much we all agree to and I'm sure you're all nodding in agreement so far

But the reality is that we can miss what God's provision reveals about how he forgives

### First, God's forgiveness requires payment

God forgives sin but he's not like a kindly grandfather who just chooses to ignore or excuse our sin rather than force us to deal with it

**Romans 6:23** tells us that sin has a non-negotiable payment attached to it and that penalty is death

In fact, the verse tells us that we *earn* death by our sin the same way a worker earns their wages by their labors

The reason for this is because God's perfect justice must be satisfied – his nature does not allow him to ignore our sin

And since the price of perfect justice cannot be fulfilled by our imperfect efforts, God sent his Son to die for all mankind so that all who accept his sacrifice could have their debt paid

The entire Bible points to Jesus and his mission to save us from our sins – first as a future promise in the Old Testament then as a present reality in the New Testament

Where we can get tripped up in our thinking is that we are told that salvation is a free gift according to God's abundant grace and that is absolutely true

But, we have the tendency to take the reality of God's grace too far when we believe then that forgiveness is also free just because Jesus paid the price for us

God's forgiveness is not without cost even though God paid the price for it and then offers it to us as a free gift

### Second, God's forgiveness requires confession and repentance

Look with me at **1John 1:9** which says –

*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

That first clause indicates that God's forgiveness is conditional upon our confession

Let's look now at a couple of verses about the necessity of repentance

First, let's look at **Acts 3:19** which says – *Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out,*

And **2Corinthians 7:10** says that *...godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.*

One must change their mind to agree with God about their sin and then must turn away from that sin and change their behavior accordingly – that's the meaning of confession and repentance and both are necessary for salvation

Look with me at one more passage, **Acts 26:19-20**, where Paul during his defense before King Agrippa said –

*Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.*

The vision that Paul mentions here is the vision he received of the risen Lord as he travelled on the road to Damascus so Paul was simply relaying to Agrippa what Jesus had told him during their face-to-face encounter

God's forgiveness requires payment and repentance but that doesn't mean that God is unwilling or unready to forgive. In fact, he has done everything on his own volition to make forgiveness available to anyone who would accept it. God has gone to the most extreme lengths imaginable to provide the means of salvation to all mankind simply because he doesn't desire that anyone should perish and have to satisfy his justice on their own [2Peter 3:9]

But still, the gift of salvation must be received through confession of sin and repentance.

Having seen how God forgives, let's turn our attention next to **how God forgets**.

## II. How does God forget?

Let's begin by looking at some verses that speak of God forgetting or "remembering no more"

**Hebrews 8:12** in quoting from Jeremiah 31 shows God declaring – *"For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more."*

And **Isaiah 43:25** reveals God saying – *"I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."*

Then back in Hebrews again we want to notice **Hebrews 10:17** where we see God saying – **"I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."**

Those are just a few of the many verses that speak of God "forgetting" – but what does it mean to say God forgets?

Odds are, it doesn't mean what you think it means.

When we talk of forgetting we mean to lose the memory of something or to have something go out of our mind.

When we reach a certain age, many of us begin to forget little things like why we came into a room or where we left our car keys or we forget someone's name just as we go to introduce them.

In the simplest of terms, forgetting is the opposite of remembering.

So when the Bible says God remembers our sins no more we might be excused for thinking that God undergoes some sort of spiritual amnesia – even if it's self-induced spiritual amnesia – in that he erases our sins from his memory.

And for God our sins are as if they never happened at all once he has forgiven us for them and he would be confused if we were to bring up our memory of our past sins to him once we have confessed, repented, and been forgiven.

But if that were the case, we would have a serious theological problem on our hands in that God could no longer be God because we would know something that he could no longer remember – and that's an obviously ludicrous conclusion.

So what does the Bible mean when it says that God remembers our sins no more?

Let's look at another verse that should help make the meaning clear – **Psalms 25:7** where King David writes –

*Remember not the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to your steadfast love remember me, for the sake of your goodness, O Lord!*

Now, presumably, David had confessed the sins of his youth but still he asks God to not remember them.

Then he asks God to remember him according to God's steadfast love.

What David is asking of God here is not to deal with him according to his former sins but that God would lovingly deal with him.

So God's remembrance has to do with how he chooses to respond to us.

And when God says he "forgets" or "remembers our sin no more" that means our forgiven sins no longer get in the way of our relationship to God – they are no longer a factor in that sense.

But it doesn't mean that God can't remember all the stuff we've done – God is omniscient and things don't slip his mind.

Let's review what we've learned so far:

God's forgiveness requires payment, confession, and repentance in order for it to be effective for us and when God forgives he chooses not to deal with us according to those sins even though he still has knowledge of them

And **Ephesians 4:32** says that we must forgive as we have been forgiven

So, what does what we've learned about God's forgiveness tell us about how we must forgive?

### **III. How must we forgive?**

**First, we must be willing and ready to forgive anyone who comes to us confessing and repenting of his sin against us**

We've already looked at Ephesians 4:32 and Matthew 6:14-15 which tell us this but also consider **Colossians 3:12-13** where we read the following command –

*Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; **as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.***

God is always ready and willing to forgive and so must we be – it's an obligation that God places on us

But more than that it should be our earnest desire if we are truly mindful of all that we have been forgiven and thankful for it – we should be eager to extend our forgiveness to others

And that's true even of the "repeat offenders" who sin against us again and again because we know that we continually sin against God and he never withholds his forgiveness when we come to him and are earnestly repentant

**Second, forgiving something means we can no longer hold that thing against the person who we have forgiven**

We all have the tendency to get historical especially when we're trying to score points against another person

And we can dredge up past offenses at the speed of light as we compile a list that proves how much we've suffered at the hands of the offender – of course also proving just how superior we are for tolerating them

While we cannot really will ourselves to forget something so that it no longer comes to mind may not be possible

But determining not to remember for punitive purposes is a choice that we can make

I once read a little story about Clara Barton, the founder of the Red Cross, who was reminded of a past wrong someone had done to her

And the person who brought it up said, "Surely you remember it?"

Only to have Ms. Barton reply, "No, I distinctly remember forgetting it."

Forgiveness has a cost and that cost for us is that we must let go of the offense against us – in that sense we must "forget" it

**But if we want to obey Scripture and forgive as God forgives, we must stand ready to forgive whenever someone repents and then determine not to hold the offense against the person any longer in any punitive sense**

But still, there are a great number of Christians who are confused about what forgiveness really means

So it might be helpful to take a quick look at some truths about forgiveness

#### **1. Forgiveness doesn't remove all consequences of the sinful action**

Even when God forgives us there still may be natural consequences that are the result of our actions that we may need to endure

God operates in two spheres when it comes to forgiveness – the spiritual and eternal realm and the earthly and temporal realm and God's forgiveness reveals itself differently in each one

In the spiritual realm, God wipes the slate clean and judicially the sinner's record is cleared

But in the earthly realm, God's forgiveness seldom, if ever, removes all the consequences or repairs all that was broken by the sin – but it does offer a second chance

Consider King David when he committed adultery with Bathsheba as we read about in **2Samuel 11-12**

David ultimately confessed his sin and repented of it and God forgave him and told him his life would be spared  
But God told David through the prophet Nathan that he would always be at war and the sword would never depart from his house

God further revealed that David's son would dishonor him publicly as he had dishonored Bathsheba privately and that the little baby son that was the product of his adultery with Bathsheba would soon die

Those were the natural consequences of David's sin and they weren't removed even though God forgave him

Still, God gave David a second chance and when David returned to a life of obedience God restored him to usefulness, allowed him to remain as king, and permitted him to write a large portion of the Bible

God's dealings with David show us a pattern of forgiveness to follow that retains earthly consequences while offering a genuine opportunity for restoration of relationship

That leads us to the second truth we want to consider –

## **2. Forgiveness doesn't automatically restore trust**

Trust and closeness of relationship are privileges that, once broken, must be earned and that can take time

We don't owe anyone either of those things and when someone has violated our trust we aren't expected to rush to trust them again

Still, we must recognize that natural consequences are not the same as punitive actions and we have to allow room for God to deal with the person who has wronged us and not take action against them

But while forgiveness means that we have to put aside all our bitterness and plans of personal revenge, it doesn't mean we must pretend that everything is okay and allow them into our inner circle of friendship

**Proverbs 14:15** tells us – *The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps.*

We need to understand that biblical repentance means more than simply expressing remorse; it also includes moral restoration and moral restoration requires more than words

Because faithfulness and unfaithfulness are traits that the Bible says will be proven incrementally over time through a person's words and deeds

Still, we must be ready and willing to forgive when repentance is expressed even if we believe the person is insincere or even if they turn around and commit the same offense against us later, just as God is ready and willing to forgive us

Forgiveness is an act of mercy and grace that doesn't need to be earned or deserved

Remember, forgiveness means that we give up the right to "pay back" someone for the wrong they have done you – it's a clearing of the accounts and not seeking to get even

However, no one who forgives can be expected to restore their relationship with the forgiven offender until they prove they are once again worthy of trust – and, sometimes, the relationship may never be fully restored

The third truth we need to understand about forgiveness is –

## **3. Forgiveness made available is not the same as forgiveness given and received**

Let me explain what I mean by that

Offering forgiveness before a person has asked to be forgiven can cause all manner of problems and short-circuit the process if they don't sense the need to be forgiven

A true understanding of the significance of sin and what it means to be forgiven may not be understood and justice may not be served if forgiveness is given prematurely

Still, we can, and should, determine to forgive in advance should the person ever come to us seeking forgiveness

Because that takes a burden off of us since once the decision is made to forgive we are free from the burden of the offense and we won't be likely to lapse into the sin of harboring bitterness in our hearts as we see in **Hebrews 12:15**

In the end, even though forgiveness may be available, it can only be given to those who want to be forgiven – there is a difference between forgiving and shedding the burden of the hurt and the offender experiencing that forgiveness

And, sadly, there are those who don't want to be forgiven – they would rather continue to hurt than reconcile

That leads us to our fourth and final aspect of forgiveness that I want to point out this morning

#### **4. It's biblically permissible to forgive and still seek to be avenged**

Those are shocking words aren't they?

But there really is a biblically appropriate time and place for seeking that a wrong be avenged

However, seeking a biblically appropriate reckoning is a very different thing from taking revenge

We are not allowed to personally return evil for evil – that is forbidden – so we cannot seek to extract our own vengeance – remember, giving up seeking personal satisfaction is what forgiveness costs

However, we can turn vengeance over to God and ask him to dispense it in his own time and according to what is just

Likewise, if the offense is great enough there is nothing wrong with desiring and even taking steps within the legal system for proper punishment to be meted out – those may well be natural consequences the offender must bear

The apostle Paul – the same Paul who wrote so eloquently about our need to forgive others – saw no inconsistency in also praying that God would repay his enemy, Alexander the coppersmith, for the great harm he had done

In **1Timothy 1:20** Paul wrote about turning Alexander over to Satan and in **2Timothy 4:14** he simply said “...the Lord will repay him according to his deeds”

And it **Romans 12:19** Paul writes – *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”*

Now, here is a caveat – we need to understand what is implied when turning someone over to God's justice

Of course, we must still have forgiven them ourselves – meaning that we seek nothing from them on a personal level

But we must also not simply want to see them harmed – we need to leave room for God to work as he sees fit and understand that God may work in a way we don't expect

God has often used punitive measures to turn the hearts of the rebellious and to turn his enemies into his friends and he may well do that in our case and the heart of our wrongdoer may be changed so that we must accept them as a friend

And that must be our desired outcome should God choose to work in that way

So, if and when you say, “Sic 'em, God!” you must be doing it for the purpose of seeing the person's relationship with God restored and, if God desires it, for your relationship with the person to be restored also

## **Conclusion**

Forgiveness is not always easy – but it's easier when we understand what it means to God

And forgiveness has great value for the forgiver even if the offender never acknowledges their wrongdoing and repents of it because it removes the burden of seeking personal retribution and turns the whole matter over to God

Still, we don't always want to forgive and that's when we need to ask God to change the way we feel about the person or situation – **we need to give God permission to do what is necessary to change our hearts so that we want to forgive**

Asking for help to forgive is usually useless because we really don't want to forgive in the first place – so we resist

But when we give God permission to change our feelings and make us want to forgive we are forced to face our willfulness and the hardness of our heart and to consider the consequences of continuing to carry the offense

**Then we should ask God to reveal to us and cause us to consider how much he has forgiven us**

And I'm talking about asking God to bring to our minds each and every sin we've ever committed

Because when we recognize just how much God has forgiven us we will see the foolishness of refusing to forgive those who sin against us

Forgiving someone is a big deal and it's a transaction that neither party should enter into lightly

It requires the offended to pay the price of forsaking any kind of personal retribution or gain and it requires the offender to humble himself by confessing his sin and repenting of it if he wants to actually receive the forgiveness

But when we offer forgiveness to those who have harmed us without excuse or we forgive things that everyone looks at as unforgivable; we become more like Jesus

Because that's exactly how God has forgiven us

Let's pray