

Healing Broken Relation *ships*

A Self-study/Group-study Guide to Handling
Conflict Within the Body of Christ

Roy J. Waggoner

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Preface

When my good friend "Jay" Waggoner first mentioned that he had developed a biblical guide to conflict resolution within the church, I couldn't help but think of how useful it would be as a self-study workbook. After reading Jay's presentation of what the Bible says about resolving conflict within the Body of Christ, I'm convinced that this is the best compact work on this topic I've seen. Those in positions of leadership within the local church, who deal with conflict on a regular basis, will find this self-study guide particularly helpful. It's a great resource for individuals or small groups interested in learning a thoroughly biblical pattern of conflict resolution, and biblical healing for broken relationships.

Sam A. Smith
The Biblical Reader

Our Need for Relationships and the Barrier that Keeps Us Apart

Matthew 5:23-26

Our relationships are vital. Relationships with other human beings are the foundation stones of our society. Relationships are crucial to the success and well being of families, businesses, churches, and communities. They are also vital to the well being of every individual. God created within us the need to interact with other human beings. Dr. Paul Faulkner, in his book [Making Things Right When Things Go Wrong](#) (page 155), cites an amazing study that connects health and well being with social interaction.

Lisa Berkman and her colleagues at the University of California in Berkeley made an intensive study of 7,000 adults over a period of nine years. They found that people with weak social ties to others had a two-to-five times higher death rate than folks with strong social ties. That's a startling statistic! They're saying that a person with few or no friends is far more likely to die prematurely than a person with a lot of friends. This finding held true, regardless of whether the person smoked, drank, exercised, jogged, or were overweight.

Why are relationships so vital to human beings?

How do you think relationships affect one's quality of life?

Relationships are certainly crucial to the individual. Furthermore, one can only wonder what the affect of broken relationships may be

“In spite of their connection to our health and well being and in spite of their importance to society in general, relationships often fail.”

on a whole generation of young people. According to a recent article in USA Today, twenty-three percent of U.S. children were living in single parent households in 1960 and by 1990

that figure had increased to forty-two percent (“Fathers Focus Increased Care On Boys,” by Marilyn Elias, 6/14/99).

In spite of their connection to our health and well being and in spite of their importance to society in general, relationships often fail.

John C. Maxwell, in his book Be a People Person (pp. 118-119), identifies a common process that relationships go through before ending in separation. He says that relationships begin with a honeymoon stage in which the parties are temporarily blinded to the negative traits of the other person in the excitement of finding someone who meets a need in their lives. The honeymoon stage is followed by the specific irritation stage in which reality sets in and negative irritating traits are noticed. The third stage is the general discomfort stage in which specific irritations pile up and the parties begin to express their discomfort. The “try harder” stage follows in which the parties increase efforts to solve their problems. Unfortunately, by this point it is often hard for them to separate the problem from the person. The exhaustion stage follows and the parties tend to throw up their hands and quit on the relationship. Separation is the final stage. Simply put, every unresolved irritation brings about a

What stages do relationships go through before failing?

Must all relationships ultimately end in separation? What can be done to prevent relationships from ending in separation?

degree of emotional distance between two people. With each irritation there is more and more distance until the relationship falls apart. Relationships need not follow this pattern. Reconciliation can be achieved, if we follow biblical principles.

How To Repair a Damaged Relationship

Matthew 5:23-26 provides us with the principles for repairing a relationship that we have damaged. Two steps are necessary.

1. Admit guilt (vv. 23-24).

The first step to repairing a damaged relationship is to admit guilt and take responsibility for one's actions. Notice verses twenty-three and twenty four of Matthew five.

(23) Therefore, if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath anything against thee,
(24) Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

When convicted

Steps toward reconciliation should be taken immediately upon remembering that we have offended someone (v. 23). If operating rightly, our conscience will accuse us when we are guilty (John 8:9, Rom. 2:15). As someone once said, *"Your conscience may not keep you from doing wrong, but it keeps you from enjoying it."* Some folks never seem to admit doing wrong. When confronted they either claim they didn't mean to offend us or they accuse us of being overly sensitive. Those who never seem to admit sin do so for three reasons. Some have personality types that find it hard to admit a mistake. Others have a poor self-concept and

What two steps are necessary in repairing damaged relationships? (You can look ahead.)

When should the reconciliation process begin?

What are the three reasons some people find it hard to admit sin?

compensate by never admitting a fault. Still others are motivated by pride and will not humble themselves. Everyone needs to be able to admit guilt both to themselves and to others. The repeated refusal to acknowledge guilt will render our conscience insensitive (seared). Once our conscience ceases to function correctly we are in grave danger. Our moral rudder is gone.

Before we worship

It is not unusual to be confronted with our sin when we come to worship. Jesus spoke of just such an occurrence in verse twenty-three. At this time the Old Testament Law was still in affect. They worshipped by offering sacrificial animals. Here, Jesus may have anticipated offenders bringing a trespass offering to God while neglecting reconciliation on the human level. Therefore, he instructed them to dis-pense with their worship until they were rec-onciled with the one they had offended.

How often do we attempt to worship God while we are estranged from a fellow be-liever? What if Jesus were to meet us at the door of the church next Sunday? Would he in-vite us in to worship, or sent us away to be rec-onciled to a brother we have offended? Reconciliation should precede worship. Upon becoming aware of any offense committed against a brother, reconciliation should be-come our first priority.

To the offended party

We must confess our sins to the Lord, not as a means of maintaining salvation, but in order to please God and avoid his loving discipline. The word “confess” in 1 John 1:9 carries the basic idea of agreement. We have to agree with God’s assessment of every thought,

What leads to “searing of the con-science?”

Do you currently have unresolved issues with Christian brothers or sisters? What do you think Christ would want you to do about these unresolved conflicts?

What does it meaning to “confess” our sin to God?

word or action. If sin is against God and no other person, then confession to God is all that is needed. No one else needs to know. However, it is often not enough to confess our sins to God alone. James chapter five, verse 16 says, "Confess your faults one to another." Obviously, this does not mean that every sin must be confessed publicly. However, when a

"Man has been excusing his sin since the very beginning."

sin affects another human being, we must confess that sin to the one we have offended. This is what James indicates in verse sixteen. In fact, a different form of the word "confess" appears

in James 5:16 than in I John 1:9. In James it is referring to open or public confession.

Man has been excusing his sin since the very beginning. Adam tried to shift the blame to Eve, and Eve to the serpent (Gen. 3:12-13). We often use such excuses as: "I'm under a lot of stress," and, "I don't feel well." One major excuse in today's society is, "I was abused as a child." Excuses may point to real and even tragic circumstances in our past, but they never excuse us from what we choose to do in the present. Issac, Moses and Daniel all turned out well, but each could have used his past as an excuse. Issac could have forsaken God and blamed it on his Father's trying to kill him. Moses, forsaken by his Mother, might have followed the ways of Egypt. Daniel, kidnapped at a tender age, could have denied his God with good excuse.

Confession of sin does not come easy for fallen men, but it is essential to our spiritual health in general and our relationships in particular. As Proverbs 28:13 says, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have

When is it necessary to confess sin to another person?

Have you used your past as an excuse for not confessing your sin? In what ways? (Be specific.)

What is "restitution," and why is it important?

mercy." Admitting our guilt is the first step to repairing any relationship we have damaged.

2. *Make amends (vv. 25-26).*

The second step to repairing a relationship is to make amends for our offense. Confession is necessary, but it is often not enough. If some material or physical damage has been done, an attempt to repair the damage or at least the expense of it should be made. The Old Testament Law contained provisions for restitution and this is specifically what Jesus had in mind in verses twenty-five and twenty six.

(25) Agree with thine adversary quickly, while thou art in the way with him, lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, that thou be cast into prison.

(26) Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out from there, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

Willingly and quickly

We must take the initiative to bring about reconciliation and do so as quickly as possible. Roman law allowed a plaintiff to forcibly bring the accused with him to court. Verse twenty-five says to agree with an adversary quickly, while "in the way." In other words, before he drags us into court. The meaning is that we should settle any matter in which we are at fault promptly out of court, paying whatever is owed. Settling a matter may only require a specific apology that acknowledges the pain we have caused. Offering a gift may also be a means of achieving an agreement. This is what Jacob did for Essau when he returned to the land (Genesis 32-33). Most wives would testify that flowers and chocolate go a long way toward achieving reconciliation, but

What steps, in addition to confession are needed in cases where material or physical damage has been done?

Why is it important to seek reconciliation as soon as possible?

Seeking Reconciliation With Offenders

Matthew 18:15-17

America's number one health problem is not heart disease or cancer. In fact, it's not even physical in nature. According to Christian psychiatrists Frank Minrith and Paul Meier, depression is America's number one health problem. In their book, Happiness Is a Choice, Minrith and Meier note the scope of the problem.

A majority of American's suffer from a serious, clinical depression at some time during their lives. At the present time, one American in twenty is medically diagnosed as suffering from depression. Of course, many more are depressed but never receive help. According to one estimate, about twenty million people in America between the ages of eighteen and seventy-four are currently depressed (p. 22).

Minrith and Meier describe depression as "anger turned inward" (p. 99). They even go so far as to say that dealing with anger in the proper way can actually prevent clinical depression (p. 151). It's no wonder that Paul tells us not to let the sun go down on our wrath (Eph. 4:26). Obviously we can express anger in many sinful ways that should be avoided.

How has "depression" been described?

However, when we repress anger rather than dealing with it appropriately, it can lead to depression. It is just as sinful to hurt ourselves through depression, as it is to hurt others through retaliation. There is an appropriate re-

“It was conflict that led to the appointment of the first deacons.

sponse to anger that lies between these two extremes.

Unfortunately, the fear of conflict hin-

ders many from dealing directly with offenses. It needs to be understood that conflict is not bad. It may be unpleasant at times, especially to certain personality types, but it is not necessarily sinful. Dr. Terry Wise makes this point in the introduction to his book, Conflict Scenarios.

Handled in the right manner, conflict can actually be positive and healthy. Yet, because our behavior during conflict is often ungodly, we equate conflict with sin. But the truth of the matter is that disagreement is not sinful; how we act and react in a conflict situation can be. You like pepperoni pizza and I like sausage pizza, that is not sin. You like contemporary music while I prefer traditional sounds, that is not sin. But when I malign you for not agreeing with me, that is sin.

As Dr. Wise indicates, conflict can be positive and healthy. It was conflict that led to the appointment of the first deacons (Acts 6). Without conflict Barnabas could not have reclaimed John Mark (Acts 15:39). And Peter would have continued in his hypocrisy if it were not for the Apostle Paul’s rebuke (Gal. 2:11,14).

What are the two harmful responses to anger that are at opposite extremes?

What is one of the main factors that hinders us from dealing directly with offenses?

If conflict is not sinful, why is conflict often associated with sin?

In what three instances do we see a positive outcome to conflict in the New Testament?

Avoiding conflict is not the answer, because often conflict is the only way to solve a problem. We need to deal appropriately with our anger by dealing directly with those who offend us.

How to Seek Reconciliation with an Offender (15)

Matthew 18:15-17 provides us with the specifics. Notice that seeking reconciliation involves a three-step process.

1. Confront offenders privately (v. 15).

The first step in seeking reconciliation when we have been offended is to confront the offender privately. Notice verse fifteen.

(15) Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother.

Go to them

Note that if a brother trespasses against us, we are obligated to go to him. The word "trespass" is in other contexts translated by the word "sin" and means literally "to miss the mark" or "to be in error." If a brother commits a sin against us we must go to him. Any offense should be handled this way. The command to go is in the present tense and it is in the imperative mood. In other words, we have an ever-present obligation to go to an offender. We are commanded to go, at all times, whenever we are offended.

What are the three main steps in seeking reconciliation? (Read ahead.)

What three things should we do when confronting others privately?

Show them their sin

The purpose of going to them is obviously to confront the offender with his sin. The matter in question should be dealt with privately, *“between thee and him alone.”* If the offender responds by admitting his sin and asking for forgiveness, *“if he shall hear thee,”* then we gain a brother. Luke 17:3 gives us the same advice. Luke says to rebuke the offender and to forgive him if he repents. Unfortunately, we often react in a number of ways that contrast with biblical confrontation. As already mentioned, we can remain silent and repress our anger opening the door to depression. This type of reaction to offense is often accompanied by avoiding the offender. As a result of isolation, we lose the benefit of our relationship with them. Another reaction involves openly expressing one’s anger and refusing to forgive the offender. When we hold such a grudge and refuse to forgive, we rob ourselves of God’s forgiveness (Mt. 6:14-15). Finally, we may resort to sarcasm, become overly critical, or engage in character assassination. Strife and factions may develop as others take sides in the matter. We need to avoid these human reactions and respond properly to offenses.

“Confrontation can make mountains into molehills.”

There are many good reasons for biblical confrontation. First, the offending party may be unaware of his offense. In such cases confrontation is necessary to produce an awareness of the offense and bring about an appropriate apology. Second, a misunderstanding may have occurred. We may have become offended at what we thought was said, when in fact we misunderstood what the person meant. Confrontation allows for misunderstandings to be cleared up. A

What's wrong with remaining silent when we are wronged?

What are three good reasons for biblical confrontation?

third reason for confrontation is that a face-to-face airing of grievances diffuses tension. Confrontation having reconciliation as its goal is a conciliatory act. Fourth, confrontation forces both parties to articulate their grievances. When we hold a grudge we usually perceive the offense to be greater than it really was, but when we are forced to articulate a grievance the reverse occurs. Confrontation can make mountains into molehills. Finally, confrontation dramatically increases the chances of reconciliation. Without it, how could we expect to resolve interpersonal conflicts?

When we confront others, we should always be gentle. Galatians 6:1 tells us that we should restore those overtaken in a fault while exhibiting a spirit of meekness. It is good to be inquisitive rather than accusing toward a brother. It is better to ask what another person meant by a certain comment than to accuse them of malicious intent. In this way one can address another person's sin in a gentle and less confrontational manner.

Work to achieve reconciliation

Reconciliation is always the goal of private confrontation. Matthew says of the offender, *"If he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother."* The desired response of the one who truly hears us is repentance and reconciliation. However, we may encounter a negative response. The offender may deny any wrongdoing, become defensive, offer an excuse, or shift the blame to someone else. Invariably, anger and accusation accompany negative responses. Perhaps as a smoke screen, the offender who is confronted makes the act of confrontation itself out to be an offense. This is an all too common occurrence. I once confronted a widow who had all but ceased to attend worship services. She had been very

What is a good method (or strategy) for confronting someone gently?

What is the goal of private confrontation?

What are four common negative responses to confrontation?

faithful in her attendance, but had often been absent since beginning to date a man in our community. After lovingly expressing my concern about her misplaced priorities, she promptly left the church and told everyone that I had offended her. In fact, she told everyone that I had hurt her more than anyone had ever hurt her. Such responses require that we take a second step in seeking reconciliation.

2. Confront offenders in the presence of witnesses (v. 16).

The second step in seeking reconciliation is to confront an offender in the presence of witnesses. Notice verse sixteen.

(16) But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.

Go again taking witnesses

Although we refer to these other parties as “witnesses” one should not assume that they serve only to confirm the offender’s sin so that church discipline can be effectively administered. Their function is to help bring about reconciliation. It is the offended party’s responsibility to select witnesses and try again to achieve reconciliation.

Witnesses are beneficial

Witnesses are beneficial for several reasons. They can bring additional pressure on the offender to repent by their words or merely by their presence. They also can act as arbitrators when the need for restitution is agreed upon, but its extent is in dispute. Finally, if reconciliation is not achieved, they will be able to confirm the offended parties efforts at

If private confrontation fails, in what three ways can witnesses be helpful?

reconciliation. This will become necessary when the third step is taken. Those who are reluctant to get involved in personal disputes should consider Matthew 9:9.

“Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God.”

3. *If the previous steps fail, confront offenders publicly (v. 17).*

The third step in seeking reconciliation is to confront offenders publicly. Observe verse seventeen.

(17) And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church; but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.

Take the matter before the church

Telling the church means bringing the matter before the assembly for a decision – as believers we are not permitted to take another believer to court. Paul warned the Corinthian Church about this very thing in 1 Corinthians 6:1, “*Dare any of you having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints?*” Instead, we are to bring the matter before the church body.

Allow time for repentance

Telling the church is not an act of expulsion at this point. Unfortunately, it is often viewed as such. A meeting is called, the church informed, and before the meeting is adjourned a vote is taken to exclude the offender. But Matthew says, “*tell it unto the church,*” followed by, “*if he neglect to hear the church.*” An offender’s neglect implies an opportunity to repent. As Marshall Shelly says in his book,

What three steps are involved in public confrontation?

Well Intentioned Dragons, “Telling the church is not punishment, it is enlisting the help of the whole body in reconciliation.” The church as a whole brings added pressure on the offender to repent. Time is required for this process to work.

If all else fails, sever the relationship until there is repentance

Only after the offender neglects to hear the church should discipline be exercised. The unrepentant offender is to be considered, “*as a heathen man and a Publican.*” He is to be treated as if he were an unbeliever. A Publican was a Jew who had become an outcast due to his profession – collecting taxes for the Romans. Tax collectors typically collected an excess of what was owed and pocketed the difference. When church discipline is finally exercised, it is incumbent on all within the body to cease their association with the offender. He becomes an outcast. Compare Paul’s words to the Thessalonians, “*And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed*” (2 Th. 3:14). It is clear from this verse that even after someone is publicly disciplined, there is still hope of repentance.

Conclusion

In order to avoid America’s number one health problem – depression – and its devastating affects, we need to confront offenders and seek reconciliation. Furthermore, these steps outlined by Jesus are not optional. Throughout this passage imperative verbs are used. We are commanded to confront offenders privately, take witnesses, and finally tell the church. These steps must be followed if there is to be any hope of reconciliation.

What is the purpose of public confrontation?

When should the church discipline an offender?

Once the church decides to discipline a member, what form does the discipline take?

Forgiving Those Who Repent

Matthew 18:21-35

Karen Linamen wrote about her refusal to forgive her husband in a recent issue of Today's Christian Woman (*Guarding a Grudge*, July/Aug. 1999, p. 61). What she shares about carrying a grudge she calls first-hand experience!

A GRUDGE USUALLY has a legitimate beginning. Someone we trust— an acquaintance, friend, or family member does something that causes us pain, and we feel hurt. Too often, we conclude: If I have a right to feel hurt, then I must have the right to feel hurt for a very, very, very long time. The trouble is, feeling hurt for a very, very, very long time doesn't damage the person who hurt us as much as it damages you and me. Grudges deplete our energy, isolate us from others, and keep old wounds from healing. They increase tension and stress in our life. They compromise our joy, disrupt our sleep, and harden our heart, if not arteries."

Besides the emotional toll extracted by an unforgiving spirit, there are other consequences. Scientific studies of those who refuse to forgive being done at the University of Tennes-

Can you think of anyone against whom you hold a grudge? Write down the person's initials and a short summary of how you feel they wronged you.

see by Drs. Warren Jones and Kathleen Lawler have identified two interesting results. One is physical in nature. Lawler says, "Those who had been unable to forgive friends or partners

"Is your circle of friends shrinking year by year? Are you lonely? Are you experiencing increased stress, tension and poor health? If so, it may be that you are unwilling to forgive."

reported more health problems." In this study they have actually measured an increase in blood pressure of those who were carrying a grudge during interviews. The second result they report is in-

creased loneliness. "There's something about forgiveness that helps us maintain satisfying reciprocal adult relationships," says Lawler (The Knoxville News-Sentinel, 8/24/99, *Learning To Forgive Could boost Your Health*, by Susan Alexander). Is your circle of friends shrinking year by year? Are you lonely? Are you experiencing increased stress, tension and poor health? If so, it may be that you are unwilling to forgive. If such serious consequences result from an unwillingness to forgive, it's no wonder God's word tells us to forgive every offender who repents. It is not an option.

We must forgive everyone who seeks forgiveness.

Matthew 18:21-35 provides both an explanation of our responsibility as well as the reason we must forgive everyone who repents.

Can you think of any reasons why forgiveness of others might be good for your own health?

What are the three principles that govern "when" and "how" we are to forgive others? (Read ahead.)

1. Every time they repent (vv. 21-22)

We must forgive everyone that repents every time they acknowledge their sin and request forgiveness. Consider Jesus' words in verses twenty-one and twenty-two.

(21) Then came Peter to him, and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?" (22) Jesus saith unto him, "I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven."

2. Without setting limits

Peter was being generous when he posed his question. Jewish rabbis limited the duty to forgive to only three times. After forgiving someone three times, doing so a fourth time was not required. Peter stretched the figure to seven in his question, but Jesus wasn't impressed. Instead, he told Peter to forgive seventy times seven. It is unclear in the original whether seventy plus seven is meant or seventy times seven. Be it seventy-seven or four hundred and ninety, the meaning is the same. Our willingness to forgive should not be limited. The offenders acknowledgment of sin and his request for forgiveness is, of course, assumed. Notice Luke chapter seventeen, verse three in this regard, "Take heed to yourselves. If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him." The word "repent" means to have a change of mind. In this case it indicates a change of mind about a "trespass." An offender who once refused to confess a sin repents when he decides to admit his sin and seek forgiveness. Those who refuse to forgive may offer one or more excuses. They may claim that an offender has hurt them too many times. It is clear from these verses that such an excuse is not legitimate. They may

What is the meaning of "repentance?"

What four excuses are sometimes used by those who refuse to forgive others? Can you think of additional excuses that might be used?

claim that the offense was too great to forgive. This too involves an arbitrary limit set by the offended party and is without precedent in the Scriptures. Some may argue that to forgive an offender would be equivalent to condoning his sin. This too is absurd since forgiveness is conditioned on repentance and repentance involves an acknowledgment of one's sin. Finally, some fear that forgiveness somehow gives an offender permission to hurt them again. This is not the case. Again, the requirement of repentance provides the necessary assurance.

Excuses aside, forgiveness may be legitimately withheld until repentance is proven to be genuine. John the Baptist required such proof when he warned the multitudes that came to him to, *"Bring forth, therefore, fruits worthy of repentance."* Marie Williams provides us with a practical illustration of how repentance may be confirmed in a recent Moody

"Forgiving someone requires a decision to never again make an issue of his or her offense."

Monthly article entitled *"Wait And See"* (July/Aug. 99, p. 14). In her first hand account she tells of separating from her husband after years of drug abuse and repeated

episodes of violence. Several months after their separation her husband showed up at church, rededicated his life to Christ and asked to be baptized. Faced with his apparent repentance she would have to forgive him, but was he sincere? She still feared for her daughter's safety and well-being. After much prayer, she decided to wait and see while remaining separated for three months. She determined to accept his transformation, if he was still attending church after the three months, and he would have to bear fruits worthy of re-

When may forgiveness be legitimately withheld?

Give some examples of how you think the withholding of forgiveness might be abused. (For example: To pay back an offender and make him or her hurt like they hurt you.)

pentance. Within three weeks he returned to his old lifestyle. We must always be willing to forgive without setting limits, but proof of repentance is sometimes necessary.

3. *Not making past offenses an issue*

Forgiving someone requires a decision to never again make an issue of his or her offense. The word "forgive" means to dismiss or

"Forgiveness is the choice to dismiss an offense. It is a decision. It involves a person's will, but not necessarily their emotions."

send away. An appropriate mental picture would be releasing a helium filled balloon. The one who possesses the balloon chooses to release it and it floats up and away, out of sight, gone forever.

Forgiveness is the choice to dismiss an offense. It is a decision. It involves a person's will, but not necessarily their emotions. The choice to forgive does not require the re-establishment of the same emotional closeness as existed before the offense. In time, an offender may regain the trust of the offended party along with the same measure of emotional closeness that existed before the offense, but forgiveness should precede, not follow, this process. It involves a commitment to never bring up a past offense or let it ever again become an issue in the relationship. Clara Barton, the famous American Civil War nurse, reportedly never held a grudge against anyone. One time a friend reminded her of a cruel thing that was done to her years before, but Clara seemed not to remember the incident. "Don't you remember the wrong that was done you?" her friend asked. To which Clara replied, "No, I distinctly remember forgetting that." Forgiveness, indeed, is a matter of choice.

What is forgiveness?

How do you think our emotions can be an impediment to our forgiving others?

Does forgiveness necessarily mean that the same emotional closeness will exist? Why, or why not?

What is the relationship between forgiving others and being forgiven ourselves?

We must forgive in order to be forgiven (vv. 23-35).

We must forgive everyone that repents every time they acknowledge their sin, and we must do so in order to receive forgiveness ourselves. To make this additional point Jesus related a parable.

1. Positionally, believers already have forgiveness.

The born-again believer already possesses judicial forgiveness (Eph. 2:1). [This is called “positional” forgiveness.] In regard to his eternal destiny, his sins have been forever forgiven. God will never bring them up again (Heb. 10:17). The penalty of sin was extracted at the cross of Christ (2 Cor. 5:21). The only condition to eternal forgiveness is faith (Eph. 2:8), and the result is eternal life (Rom. 6:23). This is what is represented by the forgiveness granted to the servant in the first part of the parable (vv. 23-27).

(23) Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, who would take account of his servants. (24) And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, who owed him ten thousand talents. (25) But forasmuch as he had nothing with which to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. (26) The servant therefore, fell down, and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. (27) Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion, and loosed him, and forgave him the debt.

The servant in question owed his lord ten thousand talents. He was evidently an over-

What are the two kinds of forgiveness that people need?

Which type of forgiveness do believers automatically possess as a result of their relationship to Christ?

seer for an ancient ruler. When it came time to settle up with his master, he owed the king a huge sum that he had collected, but evidently squandered. The amount was so large that he could not possibly repay it. A *talent* was equal to six thousand denari which was a Roman coin and a denarius was equivalent to a day's wage for the common laborer. Ten thousand talents, what the servant owed, would have been equal to six thousand denari times ten

“Although positionally forgiven, believers need forgiveness from God on a day-to-day basis in order to please him (1 John 1:9). ”

thousand or sixty million denari. Sixty million denari divided by three hundred and sixty five days would equal a common laborers

wage for 164,384 years. Even assuming a long life span of eighty years this amount would represent all a man could earn in two thousand and fifty five lifetimes! Repayment of such a sum was impossible, but his Lord had compassion on him and forgave the enormous debt. This is akin to what God does for every lost sinner who repents. He forgives a debt of sin that cannot be paid by the sinner. God himself in the person of Christ made the payment and absorbed the loss on the cross of Calvary. Every sinner who repents receives judicial forgiveness full and free.

2. Practically, believers need to forgive in order to be forgiven

Although positionally forgiven, believers need forgiveness from God on a day-to-day basis in order to please him (1 John 1:9). Otherwise, God will be displeased with their behavior and chasten them (Heb. 12:6). His chastening is always for the purpose of correc-

Why do believers need day-to-day forgiveness?

he did not extend the same compassion to his fellow servant. As Roman law allowed, he took the debtor by the throat and demanded payment (v. 28). When this was reported to the unforgiving servant's lord, he was angry and rescinded his earlier decision to forgive the servant's debt. Jesus interpreted the meaning of the parable plainly in verse thirty-five: our heavenly Father will not forgive those who refuse to forgive.

Conclusion

Indeed, we must forgive everyone who sincerely seeks our forgiveness. It is often difficult, but always a matter of obedience and always beneficial. James S. Hewett provides us with a powerful illustration (Illustrations Unlimited, Tyndale, 1988, p. 218).

Years after her concentration camp experiences in Nazi Germany, Corrie ten Boon met face-to-face one of the most cruel and heartless German guards that she had ever contacted. He had humiliated and degraded her and her sister. He had jeered and visually raped them as they stood in the delousing shower. Now he stood before her with hand outstretched and said, "Will you forgive me?" She writes: "I stood there with coldness clutching at my heart, but I know that the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. I prayed, Jesus help me! Woodenly, mechanically I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me and I experienced an incredible thing. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arms and sprang into our clutched hands. Then this warm reconciliation seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. I forgive you, brother, I cried with my whole heart.

Do you think a person who refuses to forgive another can be right with God? Explain your answer.

For a long moment we grasped each other's hands, the former guard, the former prisoner. I have never known the love of God so intensely as I did that moment!"

May we also experience such intense love.

Our Obligations to Those Who Are Unrepentant

Romans 12:17-21

Everett Worthington Jr. is described as a psychologist, marriage counselor, and recognized authority on the subject of forgiveness in a recent article published by the Knoxville News-Sentinel (*Test of forgiveness*, by Susan Alexander, 7/24/99). Worthington was at the time a faculty member of Virginia Commonwealth University and has spent many years overseeing graduate student's research on the topic of forgiveness. He has also authored or co-authored over a dozen books on the topic and presently heads the Campaign for Forgiveness Research, a nonprofit organization that funds scientific research on forgiveness. Susan Alexander's article also describes a personal crisis in Worthington's life that challenged what he knew and believed about forgiveness.

...when his telephone rang on New Year's Day 1996, his personal understanding of forgiveness was shaken to its roots. His brother, Mike Worthington, who still lives in Knoxville, was calling with shattering news. Mike had found their widowed mother, Frances Worthington, beaten to death that morning, a victim of one or more attackers who had broken into her home on Price Avenue in South Knoxville.

Later, upon hearing the brutal details of his mother's death, the same article records his own description of his reaction.

I saw my nephew's baseball bat propped up in the corner of my brother's house, and I remember saying, "I wish I had whoever did this here right now." I would take that baseball bat and beat them to death. I was furious. It was a difficult situation.

Worthington's reaction was a natural human response. We have all experienced a similar

"We have all experienced a similar desire for vengeance of one kind or another. However, we are not free to act on such desires. We have scriptural examples to the contrary."

desire for vengeance of one kind or another. However, we are not free to act on such desires. We have scriptural examples to the contrary. Jesus, when He was crucified, said, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

As Stephen was stoned, he cried, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60). In neither case was there any repentance on the part of those forgiven. Yet, in Luke 17:3, Jesus said, "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; If he repent forgive him." According to this verse, forgiveness requires repentance. How can we reconcile Luke 17:3 with the previous examples? Obviously, two different situations are in view. We are obligated to forgive those who repent; this requires a complete restoration of the relationship. But, what of those who do not repent, such as those who crucified Jesus or stoned Stephen? We cannot for-

Based upon Everett Washington's experience, what would you say is a common first response to a grievous offense?

Have you ever been seriously wronged by someone who never repented? What was your immediate response to the offense, and how have you dealt with this offense since it first happened? (Do you continue to harbor anger and resentment?)

give them in the same way, but we do have certain obligations.

Our Obligations to the Unrepentant

Romans 12:17-21 identifies our obligations to those who have offended us and who are yet unrepentant. We have two specific obligations.

1. *Don't try to even the score (vv. 17-19).*

Our first obligation toward an unrepentant offender involves not trying to get even. Consider Paul's words in verses seventeen through nineteen.

(17) Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. (18) If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. (19) Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves but, rather, give place unto wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay;" saith the Lord.

Don't repay evil for evil (vv. 17-18)

We are not to return evil for evil as if we were repaying a debt. The word "recompense" means to fulfill an obligation or repay a debt and is often used to refer to human or divine retribution. The admonition "Provide things honest in the sight of all men" is not a change of subject, but has reference to our public testimony when we refrain from getting even. The word translated "honest" means to be outwardly free of defect, to be noble or praiseworthy. The NIV translates, "Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody." The meaning is clear. We should maintain a good testimony by refusing to repay evil for evil. Thus far, Paul has emphasized our obligation in two ways, now he adds a third admonition.

What is our first obligation toward the unrepentant offender?

What two things are involved in not trying to "even the score?"

In what three ways does Paul in Romans 12:17-18 emphasize our obligation to not return evil for evil?

He says that we should endeavor to “live peaceably with all men.” Each of these admonitions contains present tense imperative verbs. God commands us not to return evil for evil at any time. Jesus himself said in Matthew 5:38-39, “Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth; but I say unto you that ye resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Leave vengeance to God

When we choose not to get even we are not dispensing with justice, but simply leaving its execution to God. We are not to avenge our-

“The desire for revenge comes naturally. It is instinctive. It does not require a decision making process. But leaving vengeance with God requires a conscious choice of the will.”

selves. Instead, we are to allow God the opportunity. This is what Paul means when he tells us to “give place to wrath.” We are to allow God the time and space to dispense his judgment. In support of his command, Paul

draws upon Deuteronomy 32:35. Vengeance belongs to the Lord. The desire for revenge comes naturally. It is instinctive. It does not require a decision making process. But leaving vengeance with God requires a conscious choice of the will. In a limited sense, this is a decision to forgive an offender. However, forgiveness in this sense is not restorative. Restoration would require repentance. It is rather a unilateral choice by the offended party not to respond in kind to the evil that was done. Everett Worthington’s story again illustrates the point. After his initial desire for revenge by beating his Mother’s killer to death,

Does forgiving an unrepentant offender ignore justice? Explain.

When is forgiveness not restorative?

Complete this definition of *forgiveness*:
Forgiveness is the unilateral choice by the offended party...

Worthington came to a decision to forgive. Later that night, unable to sleep, Worthington reflected on his Mother's death and the irony of being a researcher and counselor who had dealt with forgiveness for years. "Knowing that we had a method that hundreds of people had been able to use, I began to wonder, who did I write this book for? Was it for couples and other people who needed help? Or did I write this book for me? I think that night I was able to empathize and eventually come to forgiveness. I know as a Christian if I confess my sin, I will be forgiven of it. And I know the relief that comes as a result. If I can feel this way by being forgiven, who am I to withhold such forgiveness from a person who harmed my Mom? At that point, I was able to release him. I haven't been burdened by that unforgiveness since then." In making a decision to forgive, Worthington advises making one's commitment to forgive tangible. If you make your forgiveness tangible, you are less likely to doubt it later. Tell a friend, partner, or counselor that you have forgiven the person who hurt you. Consider writing a "certificate of forgiveness," stating that you have, as of today, forgiven.

2. Be kind to them (vv. 20-21)

Our second obligation to the unrepentant offender is kindness. We are to repay evil with kind deeds. Paul, calling to mind Proverbs 25:21-22, makes this very clear in verses twenty and twenty one.

(20) Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. (21) Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

How are some ways you can make forgiveness "tangible?"

How do you think evil might be overcome with good?

Meet their needs

It is not enough to renounce getting even. We are obligated to repay evil with kindness. Paul

“Of English clergyman Thomas Cranmer it was said; ‘If you want to get a favor from him, do him a wrong.’ We should so live so that the same could be said of us.”

puts it in very practical terms. We should meet their needs, whatever needs they have. If an enemy is hungry we should feed him. If an enemy is thirsty we should give him a drink. Any offender who has not repented has placed himself

in an adversarial position. In a very real sense, he is an enemy and we owe him kindness. Both verbs, “feed” and “give drink,” are imperatives meaning that they are commands of God. Both are also present tense verbs meaning that we are continually under these obligations. A Christian should be known for his benevolence toward those who mistreat him. Of English clergyman Thomas Cranmer it was said; “If you want to get a favor from him, do him a wrong.” We should so live so that the same could be said of us.

To produce shame and repentance

The purpose of meeting our enemies needs is stated in the latter part of verse twenty. It is that in so doing we will, “*heap burning coals upon his head.*” At first thought this sounds like vengeance of some sort. In reality, it is an appropriate way of producing shame and repentance over his previous mistreatment of an obviously kindhearted individual. John MacArthur, in his commentary (Romans 9-16, p.203), says that heaping coals of fire on some-

one's head refers to an Egyptian custom of demonstrating public contrition. He says that they would carry a pan of burning coals on their head to represent their burning pain of shame and guilt. It is the believer's kindness that leads to this end.

In August of 1998, researcher Tamara Ferguson of Utah State University presented to the American Psychological Association the results of a study in which she asked 384 college students to recall instances when somebody made them feel guilty. An AP story by Malcolm Ritter published in *The Charlotte Observer* provides us with the details. She checked on three categories of technique. One involved direct assertions saying, "That's not fair!" or, "Do you know what you've done?" A second included indirect ploys-giving hints through tone of voice. The third was introducing the topic with apparent kindness – "It's all right, I forgive you;" or "It's not your fault;" or, "You don't need to make it up to me." When the students reported an incident that produced lingering guilt, the guilt trip was usually delivered through the kindness category. It is not repayment "in kind" that produces guilt, but rather kindness that is not deserved.

Conclusion

Fulfilling these obligations is difficult because they run counter to our nature. But it is the only way we can effectively deal with an unrepentant offender. So, let us set aside all desires for vengeance and be kind to our offenders.

How can undeserved kindness positively affect one who is unrepentant?
