



## THE TWO STAGES AND TWO WORDS OF FORGIVENESS

### THE TWO STAGES OF FORGIVENESS

Biblical teaching about forgiveness can best be understood as an interaction between two types of forgiveness. We could call them two “stages” or “phases.” The first is unconditional (or “attitudinal”), and the second is conditional (or “transactional”).

#### FIRST STAGE: UNCONDITIONAL

The first stage of forgiveness takes place *between you and God*. It is *unconditional* in the sense that it does not depend on any repentance or change in the offender.

...Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. Mark 11:25

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Romans 12:14

See also Luke 6:12; 27-28; 23:34; Rom 12:14-21; 1 Cor 4:12-13; 1 Thes 5:15; 1 Peter 3:8-9.

This phase of forgiveness is a *promise to God* that you will *not seek vengeance* or retribution against someone, either in action or in your thought life. You choose not to “get even” and or to constantly bring up the past for instant replay. The following exercise can be used to implement this type of attitudinal forgiveness.

#### **BEGIN BY MAKING A COMMITMENT TO LIVE IN FORGIVENESS (first stage):**

- Carefully and prayerfully read at least one of the crucifixion narratives in the Gospels and the passages listed in this study. Pray and give thanks for God's amazing grace and his costly forgiveness—His mercy to *you*.
- On a separate paper, write down a list of the ways you believe people have wronged you. Do not try to dredge up wrongs you have already forgotten, but only consider those things which readily come to your mind.
- Go through the list, one item at a time, and *forgive*, promising God that you are releasing each item and each person into the Lord's hands, and that you will not attempt to seek vengeance against that person for the sins committed. Then “*bless*” the person, praying for God's mercy upon him/her, according to her/his particular needs.
- When you are done, *burn the list*. You are FREE. Now, if you have appropriate opportunity, and if it is wise, practice deeds of mercy toward those you have forgiven. Note: In some cases, wisdom dictates caution, and you may need to get wise counsel about appropriate next steps. Even if a confrontation is necessary (see second stage, below) you now will be able to do this in a manner that is filled with grace and accompanied by love.

#### SECOND STAGE: CONDITIONAL

The “second stage” of forgiveness takes place *between the offender and the offended*. It is *conditional* in the sense that it has in view the *repentance of the offender*.

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him... Luke 17:3

...Please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father... Gen 50:17

See also Gen 50:17-21; 2 Sam 19:18-20; Pro 17:10; 27:5,6; Matt 5:23,24; 18:10-20; Gal 2:11; 6:1,2; James 5:16,19,20.

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This phase of forgiveness is “transactional” – a *promise to the offender* that you will *not hold the sin against him*, or bring the matter up again to *him* or to *others*.<sup>2</sup>

If the offended one believes the offender has genuinely repented<sup>3</sup> of his/her wrongdoing he should *grant forgiveness* when the offender asks for it.

The General Pattern (condensed): “I have sinned against you in this way.... I am deeply sorry. Will you please forgive me?” Answer: “Yes, I forgive you.”

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## **THE TWO WORDS FOR FORGIVENESS**

### **A Brief New Testament Word Study**

- Forgiveness is GRACIOUS (Greek *charizomai*). It is undeserved and unearned; God does not forgive us because we have earned it. Likewise, we do not forgive others because they deserve it, but we forgive out of grace. Grace is “demerited favor”; God gives us what we do *not* deserve, in fact, the opposite of what we deserve.

*Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.* Eph 4:32  
See also Luke 7:42,43; 2 Cor 2:7-10; Eph 4:32-5:1; Col 3:13.

A Prayer that Knows Grace: Thank-you, Lord, that you have given me what I do *not* deserve—you have forgiven me all my sins. Now, in like manner, please enable me to forgive \_\_\_\_\_, even though he does not deserve it.

- Forgiveness is COSTLY (Greek *aphiemi*). It mirrors the cross of Christ. He bore the liability (“debt”) of our sin and so released us from liability to divine retribution. In like manner, when we forgive a person, we put aside vengeance (in deed or in thought)—even if we still bear the painful effects of those past sins against us.

*But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.* 1 Peter 2:20-21

See also Isaiah 53:4-6; Matt 6:12; 18:27,32; Luke 15:11-32; Rom 12:14-21.

A Prayer that Feels the Cost: Thank-you, Lord, that you absorbed the liability of my sin, bearing the suffering of hell in my place. And thank-you for the opportunity to follow in my Savior’s footsteps, in a much lesser way, by forgiving \_\_\_\_\_, even though I still feel the pain caused by his sin against me. Please enable me now to forgive.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS:** Can you sincerely pray those prayers above? Why or why not? God’s forgiveness, and ours to others, is both gracious and costly. Have you personally known both those aspects of forgiveness from God? In your own life currently, how can you demonstrate both these aspects of forgiveness toward others?

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<sup>2</sup> Ken Sande spells out “The Four Promises of Forgiveness”: I will not dwell on this incident, I will not bring this incident up and use it against you, I will not talk to others about this incident, I will not allow this incident to stand between us or hinder our personal relationship; in *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, third edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991, 1997, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> The “Seven A’s of Confession” given by Sande: Address everyone involved, Avoid if, but, and maybe, Admit specifically, Acknowledge the hurt, Accept the consequences, Alter your behavior, Ask for forgiveness. I like to add an eighth—Allow time, since forgiveness cannot be coerced.