

The following article is originally sourced from the
Kelly Spring Road Congregational Newsletter:

When You Shouldn't Forgive...

By Allen Dvorak, Local Evangelist

In Luke 17:1-4, Jesus gave His disciples two great challenges. He warned them, in verses 1-2, about the danger of causing another person to sin. "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea..." I believe, however, that the second challenge was even greater. Jesus said,

3 Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, 4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." (Luke 17:3-4; ESV)

Jesus indicated that even the one who has been sinned against has a responsibility. He is to rebuke the sinner...and forgive him if he repents. Even if he sins against you seven times in the same day, as long as he repents, you are obligated ("must") forgive him.

Some people are quick to mouth the words "I forgive" without understanding what forgiveness is. When God forgives our sins, He removes the guilt of our sins. As a result, we are justified, i.e., restored to a righteous state. The word most frequently translated "forgive" is *aphiemi* (ἀφίημι) which means primarily, "to send forth, send away" (*apo*, "from," *hiemi*, "to send."); *aphesis* is the cognate noun translated forgiveness - Vine). In the Greek text, it is the sins that are "sent forth" or "sent away." The sinner is in the dative case (a use of the dative of reference). Jesus said, "you must forgive him," but "him" is in the dative case, meaning that it is not the sinner who gets sent away! In divine forgiveness, God "sends away" our sins, i.e., the guilt of our sins.

When someone sins against me, my forgiveness is to be analogous to divine forgiveness (Ephesians 4:32). When the sinner repents, then I am not just authorized, but obligated to "send away" his sin. I no longer consider him guilty of the sin that has been sent away (in the sense of no longer being imputed or counted against him). I do not truly "send away" his sins, if I later periodically rehearse his sins as leverage against him. I do not truly consider him innocent of those sins, if I keep bringing them up as though he is still guilty of them.

In Matthew 6, Jesus instructed His disciples to pray, "...and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (v. 12). We are to ask God to "cancel" our debts (accusative case/ object of the verb; "us" is in the dative case).

When someone sins against me, however, there are additional consequences beyond simply the attribution of guilt. His sin may have caused several types of injury, including financial, physical, and emotional. The unfairness of my treatment by the sinner may also cause me to be angry at the sinner.

Some argue that we must always forgive those who sin against us, otherwise we may become filled with bitterness or malice toward the sinner. That argument, however, has two main weaknesses. The first is that it defines forgiveness as it is often used in the English language rather than defining forgiveness by its biblical usage. A sampling of English dictionaries provides these definitions for “forgive”:

“The meaning of FORGIVE is to cease to feel resentment against (an offender)” [Merriam-Webster; online]

“stop feeling angry or resentful toward (someone) for an offense, flaw, or mistake” (Oxford English Dictionary; online)

According to these definitions, if I stop feeling resentment or anger toward someone for his sin against me, then I have forgiven him. I have written about the meaning of the Greek verb translated “forgive” to point out that forgiveness is not primarily about how I “feel” about the sinner. It has to do with “sending his sins away,” i.e., releasing him from the guilt of his sin. The definitions cited from English dictionaries, although describing a common usage of the English word “forgive,” create a false dichotomy. I either forgive the sinner or I harbor anger, bitterness and/or malice against him. These definitions miss the point about forgiveness. The truth is that there is a third alternative: I can refuse to harbor sinful attitudes toward the sinner, even though I can’t “send away” his sins, consider him no longer guilty of them.

The argument that I must always forgive the sinner, even when he doesn’t repent, has a second weakness. It ignores what Jesus said to His disciples - “if he repents.” That phrase constitutes a condition for forgiveness, one that I don’t have the right to set aside. This is important. If I must forgive the sinner, regardless of whether he repents or not, why did Jesus even include this phrase? Why didn’t Jesus just say, “Rebuke him and forgive him”? Repentance would no doubt be an added blessing, but no condition of forgiveness.

Repentance is a condition of divine forgiveness for the alien sinner and for the Christian alike (Acts 2:38; 8:22). If I am justified in ignoring the Lord’s condition of repentance in order to forgive my brother “no matter what,” can I ignore the Lord’s command to confess faith or to be baptized? My forgiveness of my repentant brother is authorized in Luke 17:3; where is the authority for me to forgive the unrepentant brother?

I mentioned a “third alternative.” In the case of the unrepentant sinner, I don’t have the right to release him of his guilt by forgiving him, i.e., sending away his sins, but I also cannot harbor anger, bitterness or malice against him. In fact, I must deal with the emotions of my heart **independently of whether I forgive or not!** Where does the Bible say that I am permitted to continue to be angry or allow my anger to turn to bitterness or malice, if my brother refuses to repent? This is the weakness of some who claim to forgive the repentant sinner, but are still angry about the unfairness of the sin committed against them.

Paul wrote, “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice” (Ephesians 4:31). In the same chapter, he warned us about holding onto our anger (4:26). Some may take consolation regarding the unfairness of sin committed against them by “holding a grudge” against the sinner who doesn’t repent, but the Scriptures don’t give us that privilege.