

## Should We Forgive Those Who Are Unrepentant? Some Thoughts

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*by Max Aplin*



All of us who have reached adulthood have surely experienced being sinned against by people in ways that have caused us significant distress. Sometimes those who wrong us never show any sign of repenting of what they have done. In such circumstances, what should we do? Does God expect us to forgive, or should we withhold forgiveness until there is repentance? This is a very important question.

Before turning to the answer to this question, we need to ask what we mean by forgiveness. I believe that a lot of confusion is caused by the failure to recognize that we can think about two different types of forgiveness. The first type is all about how we feel. It has to do with relinquishing bitterness and hatred towards someone who has sinned. The second type has to do with how freely we relate to the person who has sinned. It is about letting the sin go in such a way that we have an obstacle-free relationship with the sinner. To be sure, usually when someone forgives, they forgive in both these senses. But the two types don't necessarily always go together as we will see in what follows, and it is important to distinguish them clearly.

If someone sins against us and then repents, we should always forgive in both the senses just outlined. Of course, we may find it difficult to relinquish feelings of bitterness, depending on what exactly has been done to us, and we may need God's help, but we know that it is our duty to do this.

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But what if the sinner is unrepentant? Should we forgive in both senses? Or should we just relinquish bitterness? Or should we even not forgive at all?

Well, the last option can immediately be ruled out. To harbor bitterness and ill will towards anyone is always wrong. God is love, and we are to love everyone as Christ loved us, regardless of whether they have repented or not.

So, it is always right to forgive those who are unrepentant, at least in the sense of giving up all hatred and bitterness towards them. But should we forgive them in the sense of completely letting go of the sin and relating to them freely and clearly?

I will admit that this is an issue I have been wrestling with for some time, and I don't claim to have all the answers. However, I am sure of some things. I am sure that there are times when it is right to forgive in this sense even when there is no sign of repentance. And I am also sure that there are times when it is wrong to forgive in this sense when there is no sign of repentance. Let's take each of these points in turn.

First, in the course of our lives, the vast majority of sins committed against us are 'little' ones that cause us a small amount of distress but no more than that. In such cases we will usually not receive any sign that the offender is repentant, and most of the time it would be inappropriate, not to mention very embarrassing, to keep approaching people - especially if they are not family members - to ask for an apology over things that are fairly trivial. Now, we should make every effort to ensure that our relationships with people are not obstructed by grievances, even small ones. Since it is not feasible to constantly approach people about minor matters, this means the only realistic alternative is to completely let go of all such sins and to relate freely and clearly with those who commit them, even if there is no sign that they are repentant.

Second, there are definitely times when we should not relate freely and clearly with people who are unrepentant of more serious sins. To begin with, Christians who are unrepentant of serious sins should not be forgiven in this sense until they repent. This is the teaching of Scripture and it also makes perfect sense:

In [Luke 17:3-4](#), Jesus teaches: 'If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in one day, and seven times turns to you, saying, 'I repent', you will forgive him.' The crystal-clear implication of these verses is that a brother who has committed a sin - other than a 'little' sin - should not be forgiven before he repents. Of course, there is no warrant in these verses for harboring bitterness towards an unrepentant Christian. These verses surely have in view the second type of forgiveness that I outlined above. They teach that we should not let the matter go and should not have an obstacle-free relationship with the brother before he has repented. We find something very similar in [Matt 18:15-17](#), although the word 'forgive' is not explicitly used.

Let me give an example of how this might work in practice. Imagine the following scenario: I am performing a task with a Christian brother, and we disagree over a course of action. Instead

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of trying to reach an agreement, the brother swears at me and marches off. Later I go to him to try and sort things out, and I point out to him that what he did was unacceptable. Instead of apologizing, his response is, 'Get over it!'

Now, although it is my duty to relinquish all feelings of bitterness, I have a choice as to what else I do. I can either forgive this brother in the sense of letting the matter go completely and relating to him in a free and clear way, or I can refuse to forgive him in this sense. Which is the correct course of action?

There is no question that refusing to forgive in this sense is the correct thing to do. If I were to let the matter go as things stand, I am doing no one any favors at all. This brother is unrepentant of his sin, and as long as he remains in this condition, his relationship with God will necessarily be hindered. It is in this sinner's interest not to forgive him in the sense of relating freely to him. Nor is it in the interest of the church that this brother is part of for me to forgive him. If a church has an unrepentant sinner among its number, that church will surely be weakened somewhat in the work it is involved in. Most importantly, it is not in God's interest for me to forgive this brother, since God wants the brother and the church he is in to be following Him as closely as possible. Instead of forgiving in the sense of letting the sin go and relating freely to this brother, therefore, I, and others, should keep insisting on repentance until the brother either repents or is expelled from the church, as per [Matt 18:15-17](#).

In the case of Christians who are unrepentant of sins that are more than minor, then, although it is right for us to relinquish bitterness, it is wrong to let the sin go and relate freely and clearly with the sinner.

I feel sure too that there are times when we should also withhold this type of forgiveness from non-Christians who are unrepentant. When I was reading up on this issue on the internet I found an article written by a Christian woman that is relevant here. She had suffered serious sexual abuse from a family member, and she approached him in order to try to begin sorting out the damage that he had done. She was hoping for an apology, but instead his response to her was, 'You're a Christian! You're supposed to forgive me!'

She decided that it would be better not to forgive this man in the sense of letting the matter go and relating to him freely. She reckoned that if she did, he would be less likely to accept the gravity of what he had done. She thought too that if she forgave him, he would be more likely to abuse other people as well. I find her train of thought a very reasonable one, and I think it is highly likely that she was right to withhold forgiveness in the relating sense in this situation. I am also sure that there are many similar situations where, if the person completely lets the sin of an unrepentant non-Christian sinner go, and relates in an obstacle-free manner with that sinner, more harm will be caused than if the matter was not let go.

So far, then, we have seen that there are times when it makes sense to forgive the unrepentant in the sense of relating freely to the sinner, and we have seen that there are times when it is wrong to do so. But how about those times when it is not so clear? Should we forgive in this sense unless there is a good reason for not doing so, or should we not forgive unless there is a good reason for doing so?

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I will admit that this is an issue which I am still working on in the 'unsolved issues' compartment of my understanding. However, at present my own inclination is to take the former course of action where possible, and to let sins go and relate freely to the sinner unless there seems to be a good reason for not doing so. I am certain, however, that quite often situations will arise when it is not in the best interest to forgive in this sense, and we should be unafraid not to let matters drop when we think it right.

At the present time gifts of healing are becoming more widespread in God's church, and this is a cause for real rejoicing. Moreover, healers are becoming increasingly aware that failure to forgive can cause blocks that prevent healing. I have testimony of this myself, which I would like to share here.

I remember a time many years ago when I was being counselled by an older Christian friend. Sitting there in the room I was suffering from strong demonic oppression with the demon pressing on my mind with confusing and dark thoughts. My friend received insight in the Holy Spirit that I needed to forgive someone. I immediately knew who it was, although previously I had not been properly aware that the low-level feelings of bitterness that I held towards the person in question were something that God was particularly concerned about.

Anyway, then and there I chose to forgive that person and I believe I could sense God helping me to do so. The feelings of bitterness left and have never returned. Importantly too, as soon as I forgave, the demonic oppression lifted as well and I had peace of mind.

I learned an important lesson that day. If God wants us to forgive someone and we fail to do so, the failure to forgive can cause us real problems and can prevent His blessing from reaching us. For our own sakes, therefore, as well as for God's sake, it is important that we all take the issue of forgiving others with the utmost seriousness.

*I have been a Christian for over 25 years. I have a Ph.D. in New Testament Language, Literature and Theology from the University of Edinburgh. I am a UK national and I currently live in the south of Scotland.*

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