

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*Is Repentance a Condition for Forgiveness, or Should We Forgive Unconditionally?*"ⁱ

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse. Last week we finished **verse 6**. I told you we were going to come back this Sunday and deal with one of the questions.

Look with me again at verses 3 and 4...

Luke 17:3 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."

Twice we are told to forgive our brother **IF HE REPENTS**.

This begs the question: What if he doesn't repent?

In other words, is repentance a condition for forgiveness or should we forgive unconditionally?

I have been asked this question and I have wondered about it myself, so I was glad to have a week to work on this sermon and try to figure out the answer.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Before we answer this important question, we need to back up and get some momentum into it...and this brings us to lesson one...

Lesson One: Rebuke sin to help produce repentance.

Repentance is one of the themes of verses three and four occurring two times. We are told to rebuke sin to help produce repentance. This is the desired outcome.

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Because we want to see people repent, we should persuade versus condemn.

Let me explain the difference between the two...

We shouldn't condemn people by saying:

- *I can't imagine God ever forgiving you.*
- *If God forgave someone like you it would make Him a bad God.*
- *You are the worst person in the world.*
- *I have never met anyone as sinful as you in my life.*

This is what it means to condemn people.

Instead, we want to rebuke people in a way that persuades them to repent. We do this with God's Word, because it reveals the truth about sin.

Here are the five steps I recommend when rebuking sin, and I put them on your bulletin. Please look with me:

1. First, find verses addressing the sin.
2. Second, share the verses with the person. If possible, ask the person to read the verses aloud.
3. Third, ask the person to explain the verses: "What do you think these verses mean? What are they forbidding?"
4. Fourth, ask the person if they disobeyed the verses: "Have you done anything these verses forbid?"

5. Fifth, ask the person the proper response to disobeying God's Word. Hopefully they will say repent, but if not, then you might have to give them that answer and tell them what it means to repent.

Persuading people to repent is little more than persuading them to see their sin the way God sees it.

Not that I have everything figured out or always pray the way I should, but if you have heard me pray for people under church discipline, I typically pray something like, "*Help them see their sin the way You see it.*"

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Also, notice it says...

If your brother sins, rebuke him, and IF HE REPENTS.

The verse communicates that it is not a guarantee that people will repent.

This might seem discouraging, but it should be encouraging. God is letting you know you could do everything right and people still might not repent. It is not your fault.

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One more important point regarding people repenting...

It is almost always a bad idea to say the words: "It's okay."

Let's say someone sins against you. God works in the person's heart to convict them about what they did. They haven't repented yet, but they are close. They come to you to apologize for what they did, and you are so blessed by their humility you say, "It's okay."

But if they sinned, it is not okay.

In fact, if God was convicting them that they sinned, but you tell them it's okay, you are telling them the opposite of what God is telling them. You could be working against their repentance and undermining what God is doing in their heart.

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We say, "It's okay," because we want to encourage people, and it is especially attractive to do so when they are humble and apologetic.

Here's the good news...

We can still be encouraging...while supporting what God is doing in their life. We can say:

- *That was humble of you.*
- *Thank you for apologizing.*
- *I remember when I sinned against someone, and I had to go apologize too.*
- *Your example encourages me.*
- *I'm challenged to search my own heart and see what I need to repent of.*

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Just as the word **repents** is one of the themes in verses three and four, the other theme is **forgiveness**...

Luke 17:3 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."

We are told that if people repent, **we must forgive [them]**...and this brings us to lesson two...

Lesson Two: Associate forgiveness with a reconciled relationship.

Forgiveness is about reconciling with people who have sinned against us. It is a commitment to graciously pardon the person who sinned and not hold the sin against them. We are choosing to reconcile instead.

Now listen to these verses that tell us our forgiveness should resemble God's forgiveness:

- **Matthew 6:12 Forgive us our debts, AS WE ALSO HAVE FORGIVEN OUR DEBTORS.** We expect God to forgive us like we forgive others.
- **Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, AS GOD IN CHRIST FORGAVE YOU.**
- **Colossians 3:13 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.**

We are commanded to forgive others like God forgives us. So, we should think about how God forgives us when forgiving others.

With that in mind, sometimes you hear people associate forgiving with forgetting: "Forgiving means forgetting."

I know forgiving would be much easier if we could simply choose to forget what people have done...but we can't do that.

And God doesn't do this either when He forgives us. You might remember a sermon I preached on July 31st titled, "[I Will Remember Their Sins No More.](#)" God doesn't forget our sins, but He chooses not to remember them.

We can't do this perfectly like God, but we can choose to try not to dwell on people's sins against us.

Now let me ask you a question and tell you ahead of time there is a right and wrong answer. I just want to say that to warn anyone who might blurt out the wrong answer!

Is forgiveness primarily about feelings or actions toward people?

Actions!

We can't control how we feel toward people, but we can control how we act toward them. If forgiveness was about how we feel toward people, we wouldn't be able to choose to forgive, because we can't control how we feel. But we can choose to forgive people because we can control how we act.

Because we can't choose to forget what people have done, we might not have the best feelings toward them when we forgive and reconcile.

When we forgive people, it doesn't mean the negative feelings go away. We still frequently have to resist the temptation to be angry, bitter, or retaliate.

But we can still forgive them, because we can choose to treat them well.

Here's why I stress this...

When we have forgiven people, it is tempting to think we haven't if we still struggle with certain feelings. We might think, "*I want to believe I have forgiven this person, but I am still hurt. I feel angry at times. I am tempted to retaliate. I have to resist becoming bitter. I must not have forgiven the person.*"

That's not necessarily true.

If someone said to me, *“I want to believe I have forgiven this person, but I don’t like the way I feel toward them at times, how do I know I have forgiven them?”*

I would ask, *“How have you treated the person? Have you been unkind and mistreated them? Then it seems like you have not forgiven them. Or have you resisted hostile feelings and acted in a kind and reconciled way? Then it seems like you have forgiven them...regardless of how you are feeling.”*

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The good news about reconciling with people whom we don’t have the best feelings toward, is that our feelings typically follow our actions.

We can’t control our feelings...directly. But we can control them indirectly. If we choose to be kind to people who have sinned against us, we typically find our feelings toward them following our actions. We find our feelings changing from hostility to affection.

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Now there are some important qualifications regarding a reconciled relationship, which we need to discuss, and this brings us to lesson three...

Lesson Three: Forgiveness doesn’t always mean the same relationship.

We can forgive people, be reconciled, and be kind...but the relationship doesn’t have to be the same as it was before:

- Forgiveness does not always mean a relationship is identical to the previous relationship.
- Forgiveness does not always mean all consequences are eliminated.

And this is another similarity with God’s forgiveness...

God forgives us, but there can still be consequences. Many Christians are forgiven but live with the consequences of sins they committed.

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Let me give you two examples of what this could look like...

Let’s say your child plays with another child and the other child hurts your child or introduces your child to something ungodly that you don’t want in your child’s life. The parents bring their child over to your house to ask for forgiveness. You can forgive the child, but:

- You might not let your child play with that child unsupervised
- Or you might not let your child go to that child’s house anymore.

It doesn’t mean you haven’t forgiven; it just means that you’re exercising discernment.

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Here’s another example dealing with adults...

Let’s say a wife is abused by her husband. She goes to the elders, which is what I would recommend. The elders find a safe place for her and her children to stay while the husband is counseled, and the authorities might be sought.

Then the elders rebuke the husband, he seems repentant, and he wants to ask his wife for forgiveness. The elders bring the wife to the husband so he can ask for forgiveness while the elders oversee the interaction.

The wife might say that she forgives her husband, but it doesn’t mean the separation should end and she should move back in with him. The husband should be given further counsel and there should be more time to demonstrate the sincerity of his repentance.

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So, at this point we understand:

- Why we rebuke sin: to help produce repentance
- What to do if people repent: forgive them

- And what it looks like when we forgive people: a reconciled relationship that under some circumstances might not be identical to the previous relationship

But it still leaves the same question that I introduced last week and mentioned again at the beginning of this sermon...

Is Repentance a Condition for Forgiveness, or Should We Forgive Unconditionally?"

Unfortunately, scholars don't agree. There are two groups:

1. One group says forgive whether people repent or not. This is known as unconditional forgiveness.
2. Another group says forgive if people repent. This is known as conditional forgiveness. I have found myself in this camp.

And this brings us to lesson three...

Lesson Four: Forgiveness should be conditional on the person repenting.

God wants us to be forgiving people. He wants us to have hearts that are willing to forgive at a moment's notice. We could go further and say the Lord wants us to have hearts that WANT to forgive. We are looking for the opportunity to be able to forgive.

Picture the father of the prodigal son waiting for his son to repent so he can forgive him and be reconciled to him...but that's the point: the father, who pictures God, for the son to repent so can forgive him.

Here's an important point...

Forgiveness is not a private, individual act involving only the person sinned against. Forgiveness is a transaction between two people.

GotQuestions.org is a site that I have recommended at times and [GotQuestions.org agrees with this view of forgiveness](#). They write...

"Modern pop psychology has wrongly taught that 'forgiveness' is one-sided (in other words, not dependent on the other person), and that the purpose of [unconditional] forgiveness is to free the offended person of feelings of bitterness... While we must not harbor bitterness in our hearts (Hebrews 12:15) or repay evil for evil (1 Peter 3:9), we should follow God's lead and not extend forgiveness to the unrepentant. In short, we should withhold forgiveness from those who do not confess and repent; at the same time, we should extend the offer of forgiveness and maintain an attitude of readiness to forgive."

I'm also convinced forgiveness is conditional on people repenting because this is what the Bible teaches. **Luke 17** says we forgive people **IF they repent**. It literally has the word **if**...

Luke 17:3 Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and IF HE REPENTS, forgive him,

And the next verse also ties forgiveness to repentance...

Luke 17:4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I REPENT,' you must forgive him."

Last week I mentioned the parable of the unforgiving servant. This is one of the premier passages in Scripture dealing with forgiveness. It is so convicting that if you struggle with forgiveness this is probably the best passage to read or memorize to grow in forgiving. You can read this parable and become afraid if you don't forgive well enough.

But even in this parable forgiveness is conditional versus unconditional. Forgiveness is extended AFTER being initiated by the person with the sin debt. Listen again...

Matthew 18:24 When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. 25 And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made.

Notice the master had not forgiven the servant at this point...which he would have done if forgiveness was unconditional.

Matthew 18:26 So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' 27 And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt.

The master forgave the servant AFTER the servant humbled himself, which I take to picture his repentance, because that's how we're forgiven: by repenting. The servant's forgiveness was conditional on him humbling himself and initiating.

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This parable illustrates two things...

First, how we are forgiven.

We are forgiven by humbling ourselves and repenting, versus working off our sin debt...which is why even though the servant asked to work off his debt, the master would not let him. Instead, he forgave him, which is exactly what God does with us when we repent.

Second, the parable illustrates how we are to forgive others. Listen to this...

Matthew 18:28 But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' 29 So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' 30 He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt...32 Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. 33 And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?'

If unconditional forgiveness was biblical, then the master would have been upset that the servant had not already forgiven the man who owed him.

But the master was not angry earlier, because the servant wasn't expected to forgive the other servant earlier.

Instead, the master was only angry with the servant AFTER he would not forgive the other servant who humbled himself and initiated the forgiveness.

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Here are some things that I knew coming into this sermon:

- I knew this teaching would be new for many of you. It was new for me because I hadn't studied this out before.
- I knew that you probably heard teaching that contradicts conditional forgiveness. I know I have.

But the main reason I thought this would be hard to hear is because of a wrong view of unforgiveness.

We tend to associate unforgiveness with becoming bitter and mistreating people. So let me try to clear that up...and this brings us to lesson five...

Lesson Five: Associate unforgiveness with an unreconciled relationship versus mistreatment.

Please do me a favor and look back at lesson one: associate forgiveness with a reconciled relationship.

Can I ask you a question?

Were you comfortable with this lesson?

If you're comfortable with lesson one you should be comfortable with lesson five.

When I say we don't forgive people until they repent, I mean the relationship is unreconciled. But I don't mean we have permission to mistreat the unforgiven person, become bitter, or retaliate.

Are you familiar with [imprecatory Psalms](#)?

An imprecation is a prayer that God will bring harm on someone. The Bible contains imprecatory Psalms, in which the author asks God to bring calamity, destruction, or judgment on his enemies.

Here's one of the more well-known ones...

Psalm 58:6 Oh God, break the teeth in their mouths.

Some of you just stopped listening to me to look in your Bibles and see if it says this. If you're mad at someone maybe now you'll be tempted to memorize this verse and start praying for it.

But when I talk about unforgiveness this isn't what I mean.

Unforgiveness is not liberty or license to:

- Mistreat people
- Retaliate
- Repay evil for evil
- Become bitter
- Slander
- Or memorize all of the imprecatory Psalms and try to call them down on people we haven't forgiven

Let me read another quote, this time from Tim Challies, who helps explain what unforgiveness is and is not. He begins with an interesting story...

[Tim Challies wrote...](#)

“Shortly after the [Columbine shootings], I remember seeing a photograph of students standing outside the school holding signs that said, “We forgive you.” I remember being surprised and [furious]. Why would anyone wish to forgive people who caused such pain and destruction, who expressed no remorse, and who sought no forgiveness. It made a mockery of forgiveness to extend it to those who do not want it. The same thing happened when at the recent Virginia Tech shootings—people forgave the killer, but only after his death and without him expressing any regret or remorse. What is it that bothered me about this?”

He goes on to explain that the people were forgiving differently than the way God forgives. Here's part of what he wrote later...

“Of course we will freely offer forgiveness, pursue and long for the ability to extend forgiveness, and seek reconciliation. But we will not forgive those who are unrepentant. This makes sense when we understand that, in its

fullest sense, forgiveness requires repentance. [Forgiveness] can only happen when one person repents and the other extends forgiveness. The ultimate aim of forgiveness is [reconciliation], but a relationship can only be restored when both parties are willing. There cannot be communion when one party is unwilling. To state that there has been full forgiveness in such a case is to make a mockery of the biblical concept of forgiveness.”

I would also say that if you believe in and practice church discipline, which you should because it is biblical, there is a contradiction if you say that you also believe in and practice unconditional forgiveness.

Or maybe I could say it like this...

If you believe in and practice church discipline, but claim to believe in and practice unconditional forgiveness, you at least believe in and practice conditional forgiveness toward people under church discipline.

Church discipline requires an unreconciled relationship with people who are unrepentant. The heart of church discipline is separation to produce repentance.

And this is why unconditional forgiveness is unloving if it ignores sin...and this brings us to lesson six...

Lesson Six: Unconditional forgiveness can hinder repentance.

Unconditional forgiveness sounds loving, but it is unloving if it ignores people's repentance. Anything that doesn't help people repent is unloving.

Carrying on with people who sinned as though nothing happened can shortchange their spiritual growth.

Repentance is a beautiful thing, and the person who rebukes the person who sinned plays a large part in that person repenting.

If forgiveness is given prematurely without the sinner repenting, then the sin has not been dealt with openly by both parties. Without repentance, the person who sinned won't truly understand the magnitude of their sin or what it means to be forgiven.

Because of our church's familiarity with ACBC, The Association of Certified Biblical Counselors, many of you are probably familiar with Stuart Scott. He works for ACBC and is one of the professors at the Master's University. Some of you might already know he teaches conditional forgiveness, but he calls it [transactional forgiveness](#). Let me share part of what he said, because he also talks about how unconditional forgiveness can be unloving...

“Forgiveness deals with sin, but unconditional [forgiveness] is just, let it go and move on...it doesn't resolve the [sin] that took place...[we must understand] what sin is. It's a breach. It separates...and it needs to be dealt with, confessed, and asked for forgiveness for [as we see in] 1 John 1:9 [If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness] and Proverbs 28:13 If you cover your sin, you won't prosper, but if you confess your sin and forsake it, you'll find mercy.

You confess to the person you sinned against. Reconciliation means bringing two people together after the sin has been dealt with. That's love. People think if you love, you won't deal with it... We move things around to make it easy on us, which is a real problem. Therapeutic unconditional [forgiveness] is more about us. It's not loving your brother or sister, and it's not thinking of God's glory, and how to remedy something for His glory.”

Interestingly, Stuart Scott repeatedly said that unconditional forgiveness is unloving because of the potential to leave the sin unresolved.

Let me tell you one more reason I believe in conditional forgiveness...

It is the way God forgives, and as discussed earlier, we should forgive like God.

God does not forgive unconditionally. If He did everyone would be forgiven, and nobody would go to hell.

Instead, God forgives us when we repent. His forgiveness is completely conditional.

And because He forgives conditionally, based on our repentance, we should forgive conditionally, based on whether people have repented.

If we were expected to forgive people when they have not repented, then we would be held to a higher standard of forgiveness than even God Himself.

Tim Challies also wrote...

“We are to model God’s forgiveness; God forgives conditionally; therefore we are to forgive conditionally...Nowhere in the Bible do I find that God holds us to a higher standard of forgiveness than He does. If God’s forgiveness is conditional, and if we are to model Him, our forgiveness will also be conditional.”

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Let me conclude with these two questions...

Does God love everyone?

Yes.

John 3:16 says so.

Does God forgive everyone?

No.

God call us to be like Him in two ways:

- We are to love like Him, which means loving everyone, even our enemies.
- We are to forgive like Him, which means forgiving people when they repent

To not forgive does not mean to not love. To not forgive means there is an unreconciled relationship, but it is unreconciled without bitterness, resentment, or retaliation.

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If you have any questions about anything I’ve preached, or I can pray for you in any way, I’ll be up front after service and I’d consider it a privilege to speak with you. Let’s pray.

ⁱ Done:

- EW
- Ellicot on BH
- Pulpit Commentary on BH
- Hendrickson
- JM
- Stein
- France
- [Since God withholds forgiveness, can we? | GotQuestions.org](http://www.GotQuestions.org)