

### Others on Conditional Forgiveness

From Pastor Chris Brauns, adapted from a previous post, this draft 11/8/22<sup>1</sup>

In my book *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Crossway, 2008), I emphasized the conditional nature of forgiveness. Christians should always be willing to forgive.<sup>2</sup> We must love our enemies and show them love. But forgiveness can take place fully only when the offending party repents.

In the evangelical church, the therapeutic view of forgiveness (forgiveness as a private emotional strategy) has triumphed to such an extent that biblical forgiveness sounds strange or extreme.

Yet, conditional forgiveness (or what I prefer to call Gospel centered forgiveness) is a topic addressed and taught by many others. Here is a wide sample of excerpts of what others have said or written in connection to conditional forgiveness. The point is not that these all agree with me or one another. They are not all Christian and they do not all agree. These sources do not even always agree with themselves! But these are relevant to the discussion. Of course, those motivated to investigate further, should read the entire context of the quotes.

#### Jay Adams (1929-2020)

Jay Adams argues without qualification that forgiveness is conditional. Notice Adams' balance in stressing that Christians *are* obligated to try and bring an offender to repentance.

What shall we say then? It is clear that forgiveness-promising another never to bring up his offense again to use it against him – – is conditioned on the offenders willingness to confess it as sin and to seek forgiveness. You are not obligated to forgive an unrepentant sinner, but you are obligated to try to bring him to repentance. All the while you must entertain a genuine hope and willingness to forgive the other and a desire to be reconciled to him or her. Because this biblical teaching runs counter to much teaching in the modern church, it is important to understand it. Such forgiveness is modeled after God's forgiveness which is unmistakably conditioned on repentance and faith.<sup>3</sup>

#### Herman Bavinck (1854-1921)

People who know themselves somewhat also know how terribly difficult true and complete forgiveness is, and how it can only be granted after a serious struggle with oneself.\* Certainly an assortment of sinful attributes such as envy, hatred, and vindictiveness, which cannot be part of God's character, play a large role here. But there are also countless cases in which forgiveness is simply impossible and impermissible. When our honor and good name, our office and our dignity, have been publicly assaulted, no one is prepared to forgive without public redress, merely on the basis of a private

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Brauns, "Others on Conditional Forgiveness - A Brick in the Valley," *A Brick in the Valley: The Web Site of Pastor and Author Chris Brauns* (blog), February 18, 2008, <http://chrisbrauns.com/2008/02/others-on-conditional-forgiveness/>.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Jay Adams, *From Forgiven To Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God's Way* (Amityville, NY, 1994), 37.

apology and confession of wrongdoing.\* And when actionable crimes have been committed, the civil government is called, not to forgive but to punish, since as God's servant it has to uphold justice and does not bear the sword in vain (cf. Rom. 13:4).<sup>4</sup>

Kit Barker (Sydney Missionary and Bible College)

The biblical portrayal of forgiveness is that there is only one kind of forgiveness and that it is conditioned upon repentance. Unconditional forgiveness has little support in Scripture. *There is no explicit command to forgive offenders who remain unrepentant.* There are many commands to forgive (e.g., Mark 11:25), but they either mention repentance explicitly as a condition or require that it be implied on the basis of (1) the immediate context; (2) those passages where it is explicit; and (3) divine forgiveness, where we see the movements of forgiveness more clearly.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding conditional forgiveness, Barker makes five points:

1. First, conditional forgiveness justly labels the offense as an offense and is predicated by the offender having done the same . . .
2. Second, conditional forgiveness is an act of justice in that it honors the moral stance the offender has taken with respect to their wrongdoing . . .
3. Third, conditional forgiveness acts justly towards the offender, allowing them to be confronted with their offense and offering them an opportunity to respond.
4. Fourth, conditional forgiveness promotes justice in that it models divine forgiveness.
5. Finally, conditional forgiveness promotes reconciliation.<sup>6</sup>

He later adds:

I fear that therapeutic articulations of forgiveness not only misrepresent the nature of forgiveness, but they can also promote unrealistic expectations of healing, especially when they circumvent justice and trivialize the offense.<sup>7</sup>

Craig Blomberg (Denver Seminary)

When no true repentance has occurred, it can actually be counterproductive or even harmful to “forgive” in the sense of acting like everything is all right again. . .

Our analysis has yielded a coherent interpretation of Matthew 18:15-35. No part of this half chapter need be seen as contradicting any other part. When a believer sins against another, Jesus provides a specific multi-step process to facilitate repentance as often as possible. True repentance will be accompanied by both an acknowledgement of

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<sup>4</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, vol. 4, Reformed Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 180.

<sup>5</sup> Kit Barker, “Drawing Pictures in the Water: The Place of Penitence in the Art of Forgiveness,” in *The Art of Forgiveness*, ed. Philip Halstead and Myk Habets (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books / Fortress Academic, 2018), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Barker, 27–28.

<sup>7</sup> Barker, 30.

wrongdoing and, over time, a change in behavior. When true repentance occurs, true believers will extend forgiveness that leads to reconciliation.<sup>8</sup>

### Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)

A German pastor who stood against the Nazis and was executed by them. Bonhoeffer warned about “cheap grace.”

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance.<sup>9</sup>

But do we also realize that this cheap grace has turned back on us like a boomerang? The price we are having to pay today in the shape of the collapse of the organized church is only the inevitable consequence of our policy of making grace available to all at too low a cost. We gave away the word and sacraments wholesale, we baptized, confirmed, and absolved a whole nation unasked and without condition. Our humanitarian sentiment made us give that which was holy to the scornful and the unbelieving. We poured forth unending streams of grace. But the call to follow Jesus in the narrow way was rarely ever heard.<sup>10</sup>

### Ardel Caneday ([University of Northwestern St. Paul](#))

With the tragic case of the murder of Pastor Fred Winters in view, Caneday unfolds the biblical logic for conditional forgiveness. Caneday reasons:

1. Forgiveness always concerns sin.
2. God forgives confessed sin.
3. God’s forgiveness correlates to our forgiveness.
4. Our forgiving must be like God’s forgiving of our sins.
5. God’s forgiveness of sin is for the repentant and so is ours.
6. Not to grant forgiveness of sins to the unrepentant is not the same as being unforgiving

Caneday takes the time to explain some of the problems that result from unbiblical teaching on forgiveness. Here is one quote:

If we “unconditionally forgive” the sins of unrepentant people we subvert the gospel of Jesus Christ, mock God, and diminish the glory of the cross. Those who advocate and practice “unconditional forgiveness” do so out of misunderstanding the gospel’s teaching. While thinking that they embrace the magnanimity of God’s mercy and grace, without realizing it, they actually sabotage the magnanimous grace of accomplished through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, “On Building and Breaking Barriers: Forgiveness, Salvation and Christian Counseling with Special Reference to Matthew 18: 15-35,” *The Journal of Psychology & Christianity* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 146.

<sup>9</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R.H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth, First Paperback Edition ed. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1963), 47.

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, ed. Irmgard Booth (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 58.

One of the more helpful distinctions Caneday makes is his point that, “Not to grant forgiveness of sins to the unrepentant is not the same as being unforgiving.” Hence, Caneday stresses,

We must always be ready to forgive, eager to forgive, praying that the Lord would grant repentance to the unrepentant person in order that both he and we may grant forgiveness of sins.<sup>11</sup>

Elsewhere, Caneday writes:

Let us forgive sins like God forgives as he grants forgiveness to us when we repent. As God is forgiving and not filled with bitterness or with grudge-bearing, so we are obligated to be forgiving, always eager and ready to forgive everyone who sins against us and promptly to grant forgiveness when they repent. If we would be like God, we must not bestow forgiveness of sins to people who refuse to repent of the evil they commit against us. Jesus states plainly that we are obligated to discern when to forgive and when not to forgive sins committed against us (cf. John 20:23). To forgive the sins of the unrepentant is not right; it is not godlike. To yearn to forgive and promptly to grant forgiveness when repentance is forthcoming is godliness; it is to be like God who has graciously forgiven our sins which we confess.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A.B. Caneday, *Must Christians Always Forgive?* (Center for Cultural Leadership, 2011), 16, <http://www.lulu.com/us/en/shop/a-b-caneday/must-christians-always-forgive/paperback/product-16539784.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Ardel Caneday, “Faithful Theology: Preserving Distinctions without Separation,” *Https://Credomag.Com/*, September 24, 2011, <https://credomag.com/2011/09/faithful-theology-preserving-distinctions-without-separation/>.

S. Carmy (Yeshiva University)

When we pardon those who trespass against us because we have been told that it's good for our physical or mental health, we're doing something different [than forgiveness]. We are acting not for the benefit of the offender, but for our own sake. We confuse a freely offered, transcendent act of love with the psychological equivalent of a laxative." Shalom Carmy.<sup>13</sup>

John N. Day

John Day wrote a book about the Imprecatory Psalms.

In this, the Christian must embrace the tension inherent in reflecting both "the kindness and severity of God (Romans 11:22). It is a tension that previous generations of the faithful have also faced. The imprecatory psalms are a reminder that a war is raging. It is a war of opposing powers, with casualties, traitors, and triumphs. The principal weapon of that warfare is the dual-edged message of the gospel—a message not of sweet passivity, but of life and death itself.<sup>14</sup>

The assurance of God's ultimate justice (then) frees radical love (now)."<sup>15</sup>

It is legitimate at times for God's present people to utter prayers of imprecation or pleas for divine vengeance - - like those in the psalms - - against the recalcitrant enemies of God and his people. Such expression is consistent with the ethics of the Old Testament and finds corresponding echo in the New.<sup>16</sup>

Ligon Duncan (Reformed Theological Seminary)

In a round table discussion, Duncan said:

This is a question that many Christians have never thought through. I think that Christians who have themselves harbored unjustified bitternesses and have been unforgiving in places and in ways that they should have been forgiving, often when they are confronted with and gripped by the radical teaching of Christ on forgiveness, out of sorrow for their own sin, read Jesus' teaching on forgiveness in such a way that they understand it to mean that forgiveness is an automatic obligation in every circumstance, irrespective of the repentance of the other party. And, again, I think that that is a mistake. I believe that forgiveness always has in view reconciliation, and reconciliation is always two-sided. So if there is not a repentance corresponding to a forgiveness, then very often

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<sup>13</sup> Shalom Carmy, "Litvak at Large: Did Joseph Forgive His Brothers," *First Things*, no. 285 (September 2018): 18–19.

<sup>14</sup> John N. Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. April-June (2002): 115.

<sup>15</sup> Day, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Day, 109.

there is an impossibility of reconciliation. I think that whatever we think about forgiveness, forgiveness is a component to what is a larger picture, and the larger picture is reconciliation. And reconciliation is necessarily two-sided. Consequently, I think it is important for us to talk about both forgiveness and readiness to forgive. There may be circumstances where a reconciliation is impossible, but a readiness to reconcile can still be present with a believer. Consequently, I would want to make that distinction when I was counseling a believer who was in a circumstance where there was not a present possibility of reconciliation of the relationship. Instead of telling them that they need to forgive or they will become bitter, I think I would rather say that you need to be ready to forgive and not to be captured by your bitterness.<sup>17</sup>

#### Kairos Document from S. Africa issued in 1986

“In our situation in South Africa today it would be totally unChristian to plead for reconciliation and peace before the present injustices have been removed. Any such plea plays into the hands of the oppressor by trying to persuade those of us who are oppressed to accept our oppression and to become reconciled to the intolerable crimes that are committed against us. That is not Christian reconciliation, it is sin. It is asking us to become accomplices in our own oppression, to become servants of the devil. No reconciliation is possible in South Africa without justice.

What this means in practice is that no reconciliation, no forgiveness and no negotiations are possible without repentance. The Biblical teaching on reconciliation and forgiveness makes it quite clear that nobody can be forgiven and reconciled with God unless he or she repents of their sins. Nor are we expected to forgive the unrepentant sinner. When he or she repents we must be willing to forgive seventy times seven times but before that, we are expected to preach repentance to those who sin against us or against anyone. Reconciliation, forgiveness and negotiations will become our Christian duty in South Africa only when the apartheid regime shows signs of genuine repentance.”

#### Derek Kidner (1913-2008)

Kidner commenting on Stephen’s prayer for those who stoned him.

Stephen’s prayer for his enemies could be answered only through their repentance, as indeed it was in the case of Saul.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> A Roundtable Discussion on Forgiveness: Derek Thomas Interviews Ligon Duncan and Justin Taylor, (Reformation 21, accessed October 23 2007); Previously available at [http://www.reformation21.com/Upcoming\\_Issues/Forgiveness\\_Roundtable/354/](http://www.reformation21.com/Upcoming_Issues/Forgiveness_Roundtable/354/).

<sup>18</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, ed. D.J. Wiseman, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), 30.

### John MacArthur ([Grace Community Church](#))

John MacArthur argues that for small matters there are times when forgiveness is unilaterally and unconditionally granted.<sup>19</sup> But, MacArthur also argues that conditional forgiveness is at times appropriate:

It is obvious from Scripture that sometimes forgiveness must be conditional . . . There are times when it is necessary to confront an offender. In such cases, unconditional forgiveness is not an option. These generally involve more serious sins- – not petty or picayune complaints, but soul-threatening sins or transgressions that endanger the fellowship of saints.<sup>20</sup>

### John Murray (1898-1975)

Forgiveness is a definite act performed by us on the fulfillment of certain conditions. . . . Forgiveness is something actively administered on the repentance of the person who is to be forgiven. We greatly impoverish ourselves and impair the relations that we should sustain to our brethren when we fail to appreciate what is involved in forgiveness.<sup>21</sup>

### Arthur Pink in a sermon, "[The Word of Forgiveness](#)"

“Notice Christ did not personally forgive His enemies. So in [Matt. 5:44](#) He did not exhort His disciples to forgive their enemies, but He does exhort them to “pray” for them. But are we not to forgive those who wrong us? This leads us to a point concerning which there is much need for instruction today. Does Scripture teach that under all circumstances we must always forgive? I answer emphatically, it does not. The Word of God says, “If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him” ([Luke 17:3,4](#)). Here we are plainly taught that a condition must be met by the offender before we may pronounce forgiveness. The one who has wronged us must first “repent,” that is, judge himself for his wrong and give evidence of his sorrow over it. But suppose the offender does not repent? Then I am not to forgive him. But let there be no misunderstanding of our meaning here. Even though the one who has wronged me does not repent, nevertheless, I must not harbor ill-feelings against him. There must be no hatred or malice cherished in the heart. Yet, on the other hand, I must not treat the offender as if he had done no wrong. That would be to condone the offence, and therefore I should fail to uphold the requirements of righteousness, and this the believer is ever to do. Does God ever forgive where there is no repentance? No, for Scripture declares, “If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” ([I John 1:9](#)). One thing more. If one has injured me and repented not, while I cannot forgive him and treat him as though he had

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<sup>19</sup> John MacArthur, *Forgiveness: The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 122–28.

<sup>20</sup> MacArthur, 119–28.

<sup>21</sup> John Murray, “A Lesson in Forgiveness,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 3 (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 191.

not offended, nevertheless, not only must I hold no malice in my heart against him, but I must also pray for him. Here is the value of Christ's perfect example. If we cannot forgive, we can pray for God to forgive him." A. Pink<sup>22</sup>

### John Piper (Bethlehem Baptist Church)

In a [sermon](#), John Piper pointed to the conditional forgiveness.[8] While Piper allowed that at points Christians should forgive unconditionally he also added:

One last observation remains: forgiveness of an unrepentant person doesn't look the same as forgiveness of a repentant person.

In fact I am not sure that in the Bible the term forgiveness is ever applied to an unrepentant person. Jesus said in Luke 17:3-4 "Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." So there's a sense in which full forgiveness is only possible in response to repentance.

But even when a person does not repent (cf. Matt. 18:17) we are commanded to love our enemy and pray for those who persecute us and do good to those who hate us (Luke 6:27). The difference is that when a person who wronged us does not repent with contrition and confession and conversion (turning from sin to righteousness), he cuts off the full work of forgiveness. We can still lay down our ill will; we can hand over our anger to God; we can seek to do him good; but we cannot carry through reconciliation or intimacy.<sup>23</sup>

But elsewhere Piper writes:

Can we forgive a person who doesn't think he's done wrong and we think he has, or if he doesn't ask for any forgiveness? The answer is we can and we must. We must do our part in the forgiveness. This is what Jesus meant, I think, when he said, "Love your enemies . . . bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" ([Luke 6:27-28](#)). They are still our enemies when we do that. They have not asked for any forgiveness, and they don't think they need any, making life miserable for us — and they think they ought to. We are to bless them, and that blessing means that our part of the inward forgiveness has happened. The opposite of forgiveness is holding a grudge, but blessing is the opposite of holding a grudge, and so blessing is a kind of forgiving.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Arthur W. Pink, "'The Word of Forgiveness' by Arthur W. Pink," accessed April 7, 2021, [https://www.the-highway.com/forgiveness1\\_Pink.html](https://www.the-highway.com/forgiveness1_Pink.html).

<sup>23</sup> John Piper, "As We Forgive Our Debtors: What Does Forgiveness Look Like," 1994, [http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1994/868\\_As\\_We\\_Forgive\\_Our\\_Debtors/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1994/868_As_We_Forgive_Our_Debtors/).

<sup>24</sup> John Piper, Can I Forgive Someone Who Doesn't Confess Wronging Me?, *Desiring God*, May 10, 2017, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/can-i-forgive-someone-who-doesnt-confess-wronging-me>.



Dennis Prager ([Talk Show Host](#))

Dennis Prager warned against automatic forgiveness in a *Wall Street Journal* article:

The bodies of the three teen-age girls shot dead last December by a fellow student at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky., were not yet cold before some of their schoolmates hung a sign announcing, "We forgive you, Mike!" They were referring to Michael Carneal, 14, the killer.

This immediate and automatic forgiveness is not surprising. Over the past generation, many Christians have adopted the idea that they should forgive everyone who commits evil against anyone, no matter how great and cruel and whether or not the evildoer repents.

The number of examples is almost as large as the number of heinous crimes. Last August, for instance, the preacher at a Martha's Vineyard church service attended by the vacationing President Clinton announced that the duty of all Christians was to forgive Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber who murdered 168 Americans. "Can each of you look at a picture of Timothy McVeigh and forgive him?" the Rev. John Miller asked. "I have, and I invite you to do the same."

Though I am a Jew, I believe that a vibrant Christianity is essential if America's moral decline is to be reversed. And despite theological differences, Christianity and Judaism have served as the bedrock of American civilization. And I am appalled and frightened by this feel-good doctrine of automatic forgiveness.<sup>25</sup>

David J. Reimer ([St. Andrews](#))

Reimer's article, "Stories of Forgiveness: Narrative Ethics and The Old Testament," is a concise gold mine on forgiveness narratives in the Old Testament.<sup>26</sup>

Reimer explains that in knowing Old Testament stories of forgiveness, our own understanding of forgiveness is "enriched and sustained."<sup>27</sup> He writes:

Rather, we deal here with stories which invite us into their world, and we enter it our own world is re-created. . . . To learn for ourselves how to be moral people as far as forgiveness is concerned means not simply to follow through certain obligations, but to allow our actions and our understanding of the world to be shaped by the Bible's stories of forgiveness as affirmation of life."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Dennis Prager, "The Sin of Forgiveness," *The Wall Street Journal*, 1997, <http://www.dennisprager.com/forgiveness.html>.

<sup>26</sup> David J. Reimer, "Stories of Forgiveness: Narrative Ethics and the Old Testament," in *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld*, ed. Robert Rezetko, Timothy H. Lim, and W. Brian Aucker (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 359-78.

<sup>27</sup> Reimer, 378.

<sup>28</sup> Reimer, 378.

In terms of whether or not forgiveness is automatic in Old Testament narratives, Reimer concludes, “These stories give no sense that the offended is under an obligation to forgive.”<sup>29</sup> However, he does demonstrate that forgiveness is considered a matter of life and death.<sup>30</sup>

Ken Sande (Formally Peacemakers, now [RW360](#))

Ken Sande agrees that there are times when a matter should be overlooked.<sup>31</sup> And, he also agrees that in most ideally forgiveness should follow repentance. Sande pictures forgiveness as a two-stage process. In his words:

When an offense is too serious to overlook and the offender has not yet repented, you may need to approach forgiveness as a two-stage process. The first stage requires having an attitude of forgiveness, and the second, granting forgiveness. Having an attitude of forgiveness is unconditional and is a commitment you make to God . . . By his grace you seek to maintain a loving and merciful attitude toward someone who has offended you . . .

Granting forgiveness is conditional on the repentance of the offender and takes place between you and that person . . . When there has been a serious offense, it would not be appropriate to [make the promises of forgiveness] until the offender has repented.<sup>32</sup>

Colin Smith ([The Orchard](#))

Smith began a sermon titled, “When God Can’t Forgive,” in the following way:<sup>33</sup>

**(Introduction to the podcast)**

Is it a Christian obligation to forgive where there is no repentance? Can there be forgiveness without reconciliation? What are you you to do if you are faced with a situation where there is no sign of repentance and reconciliation seems impossible. Welcome to unlocking the Bible with pastor Colin Smith and Colin you realize that you just asked some really huge questions right there?

Yeah and sadly some really relevant ones as well I mean for so many there's this struggle that you face with a situation where they're just isn't the prospect of reconciliation right now and the reason for that is there's no repentance and perhaps the issue was a major issue and here's someone who's carrying on in a pattern of life that is desperately destructive and without any sign of turning. And what are you to do as a Christian? How are you to honor the Lord? And I think that's a question that many believers many

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<sup>29</sup> Reimer, 377.

<sup>30</sup> Reimer, 374.

<sup>31</sup> Ken Sande, *The Peace Maker* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 77–99.

<sup>32</sup> Sande, 210–11.

<sup>33</sup> Collin Smith, “When God Can’t Forgive, Part 1” (Orchard (Unlocking the Bible), Barrington, IL, August 30, 2017), <http://unlockingthebible.org/broadcast/god-cant-forgive-part-1-2/>; Collin Smith, “When God Can’t Forgive, Part 2” (Orchard (Unlocking the Bible), Barrington, IL, August 31, 2017), <http://unlockingthebible.org/broadcast/god-cant-forgive-part-2-2/>.

Christians would say . . . “I really want to know the answer to that because that is my heart's desire.” And you know there are different responses to that question that you would hear from different pastors -- pastors I esteem very, very highly -- sometimes it's not easy to know how to apply the bible to particular situations of difficulty.

- **1:29** - What I'm going to share today I want to do in a spirit of genuine humility recognizing that others would say something different but sharing what's honestly been my conclusion from my own study of the scripture and study historically of some great Christian leaders who've tried to address this question, “What is the calling of God for a Christian when you're faced with someone who does not repent?” And part of the answer to that comes from seeing how does God look upon the person who does not repent we're going to explore that together and I went to offer but I've tried to offer pastorally to other people in a way that I hope will be helpful to some who are facing this really, really tough circumstance . . .

(From the recorded sermon) - The message that I want to bring today has been brewing in my mind for over two year. it began with a conversation that I had back then with a good friend who is a wise pastor and also has been to me a good mentor. I asked him when we met up two years ago what he was working on.

And he said to me, “Colin I'm convinced that we've got it wrong over this whole matter of forgiveness.”

“Really,” I said. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he said. “We tell our people that God calls you to forgive every offense even if there is no sign of repentance. And God himself doesn't do that.”

“Yes,” I said. “But, of course, the reason that we do that is that if I don't forgive I end up being chained by bitterness.”

To which he said, “Why would you think that the only alternative to forgiving is bitterness? Do you really think that God is bitter with those he has not yet forgiven.”

Well, that got me thinking as I hope it does you too. And going back to the scriptures on this whole question of forgiveness and repentance and reconciliation. And, of course, the big question is how are these three related together?

Justin Taylor ([Crossway](#))

In a post “[Is Forgiveness Always Right and Required?](#)”

“Love your enemies” is something that we should do at all times and in all places. It is modeled after God’s love for his enemies, whom he loves even when they are “unjust” and “evil” (Luke 6:35). At the same time, our forgiveness of others is likewise modeled upon God’s forgiveness of sinners, whom he forgives conditioned upon their repentance.

God does not forgive apart from repentance; neither should we. In major offenses, we are not to forgive the unrepentant.

In the event of a tragedy that involves the loss of human life brought about by wanton human sin, it is therefore wrong for Christians to call upon immediate forgiveness in the absence of repentance. Such a call both cheapens and misunderstands the biblical doctrine of forgiveness.<sup>34</sup>

Douglas Wilson ([Christ Church](#))

We cannot forgive those who are defiant, however much we might like to. Because forgiveness is a transaction, if someone steals your car, you can't run down the street after them, yelling out your forgiveness.

But you can have a heart full of forgiveness, full to the brim, ready to overflow the moment repentance appears. Until that happens, there is no forgiveness. We need to distinguish forgiveness in principle and forgiveness accomplished.<sup>35</sup>

Nicholas Wolterstorff ([Yale University](#))

Can I forgive Hubert if I believe that he is not contrite? Believing that he continues to stand behind what he did, can I nonetheless form and enact the resolution not to hold it against him? Suppose I believe that Jesus commands us to forgive the one who has wronged us whether or not he is penitent. Can I, out of what I believe to be my Christian duty, form and act on the resolution not to hold against him what he did to me even though I believe that he is impenitent?

I doubt it. I can be *willing* to forgive him – when he repents. I can have a forgiving disposition toward him. But it appears to me that no longer to hold against someone the wrong he did one while believing that he himself continues to stand behind the deed, requires not treating the deed or its doer with the moral seriousness required for forgiveness; it is to downplay rather than forgive.<sup>36</sup>

But suppose I am mistaken about this. Suppose it is possible fully and completely to forgive the person who has wronged one while knowing full well that he continues to stand firmly behind what he did. Then I would say, first, that such an action is unacceptably arbitrary. We are to suppose that one continues to hold against some people the wrong they did one; one is not a moral wimp who waves aside all wrongs done to one. So why is one not holding this wrong against the wrongdoer, when one holds other wrongs against other wrongdoers? What is the morally relevant difference?<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Justin Taylor, "Is Forgiveness Always Right and Required," 2007, <http://theologica.blogspot.com/2007/01/is-forgiveness-always-right-and.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Douglas Wilson, *For a Glory and a Covering: A Practical Theology of Marriage*, Illustrated edition (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2006), 95.

<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, "What Is Forgiveness?," in *Justice in Love*, Reprint edition, Emory University Studies in Law and Religion (Eerdmans, 2015), 173.

<sup>37</sup> Wolterstorff, 173.

“Jesus is nowhere in the New Testament reported as issuing any such command. Whereas he enjoins us to love our enemies and seek to do them good, he nowhere enjoins us to forgive them.<sup>38</sup>

An implication of this position is that one cannot forgive the wrongdoer who is dead if one believes he was never penitent, nor the wrongdoer who has sunk into dementia. In such cases, one lives with the regret that forgiveness never became possible. There is no escape in this life from this feature of our human condition. We have to cope with it, not pretend that it is in our power to undo it.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Wolterstorff, 172, n. 17.

<sup>39</sup> Wolterstorff, 173, n. 18.

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