

FORGIVE



WHY SHOULD I
AND HOW CAN I?

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APPENDIX A

FORGIVENESS PRINCIPLES

1. ***The difficulty of forgiveness lies in that it is unnatural—it is not the nature of things.*** It is counterintuitive to our basic human instincts and nature. A holy God's forgiveness was a mystery (before the coming of Christ), as God himself proclaimed in Exodus 34:7. Forgiveness is therefore always a wonder and surprise, and it needs to be accounted for rather than ever taken for granted.
2. ***The dynamic of forgiveness is the atoning death of Christ,*** which provides satisfaction for sin through the self-substitution of God. This is what makes forgiveness possible (from both God and humans)

despite its difficulty and unnaturalness. Our forgiveness of others is based on and empowered by (theologically, motivationally, and practically) God's forgiveness of us through the cross.

3. ***The fading of forgiveness comes because of the inadequacy of contemporary forgiveness models, which lack the vertical dimension.*** Christian forgiveness (a) differs from the therapeutic model because it seeks justice and reconciliation; (b) differs from the merited or transactional forgiveness model because it offers internal forgiveness; (c) differs from the modern antipathy toward any forgiveness because it shows us the need for it, the costliness of it, and the power of it.
4. ***The history of forgiveness is rooted in the Bible.*** While all cultures have some idea of forgiveness, the dominant ideas about it in the world today derive from the Old and New Testaments. The loss of orientation to forgiveness today has to do with both the decline of Christian faith and the distortion of the concept within the churches.

5. **The definition of forgiveness is to renounce revenge and be open to reconciliation.** Revenge is being satisfied by another person's unhappiness, especially that inflicted by you. To forgive is to (a) name the wrong truthfully as indeed wrong and punishable (rather than merely excusing it) but also to (b) identify with the perpetrator as a fellow sinner, to (c) release the wrongdoer from liability from personal payback by absorbing the debt oneself (rather than merely pardoning), and finally to (d) aim for reconciliation and the restoration of the relationship that was broken by the wrong.
6. **The dependencies of forgiveness.** (a) Internal or attitudinal forgiveness is *not* dependent on the response of the perpetrator. It can be done in any circumstances. (b) The work of actual reconciliation *is* dependent on the wronged person doing internal forgiveness and the repentance of the perpetrator.
7. **The resources for forgiveness are twofold:** (a) poverty of spirit—and the humility that comes from knowing our salvation is by sheer grace, not merit, and (b) wealth of spirit—and the assurance of love that

comes from knowing our salvation is by sheer grace, not merit.

8. **The dimensions of forgiveness are threefold:**

- a. **The vertical or upward dimension.** The character and reception of God's forgiveness: (1) God's salvation is more than past forgiveness but the basis for future forgiveness: justification and adoption. (2) The instrument(s) that receive this divine forgiveness and salvation are repentance and faith.
- b. **The internal or inward dimension.** The character and granting of human forgiveness: (1) It is granted before felt because it is a promise and a practice. (2) It entails costly suffering, as it absorbs the debt rather than seeking revenge.
- c. **The horizontal or outward dimension.** The character and extension of human forgiveness: (1) It pursues both mercy and justice together and interdependently, since both are forms of love. (2) It holds out the offer of a reconciled relationship and, eventually, a restoration of trust.

APPENDIX C

FORGIVENESS PRACTICES

1. WHAT FORGIVENESS IS

When speaking of forgiveness, Jesus uses the image of “debts” to describe the nature of sins (Matthew 18:21–35, 6:12).

When someone seriously wrongs you, there is an unavoidable sense that the wrongdoer *owes* you. The wrong has incurred an obligation, a liability, a debt. Anyone who is wronged feels a compulsion to make the other person pay down that debt. We do that by hurting them, yelling at them, making them feel bad in

some way, or even just waiting and watching and hoping that something bad happens to them.

Only after we see them suffer in some commensurate way do we sense that the debt has been paid and the feeling of obligation is gone. This sense of debt/liability and obligation is impossible to escape. Anyone who denies it exists has simply not been wronged or sinned against in any serious way.

What, then, is forgiveness? Forgiveness means giving up the right to revenge, the right to seek repayment from the one who harmed you. It must be recognized that forgiveness is a form of voluntary suffering. What do we mean?

Think about how monetary debts work. If a friend breaks my lamp, and if the lamp costs fifty dollars to replace, then the act of lamp breaking incurs a debt of fifty dollars. If I let him pay for and replace the lamp, I get fifty dollars. But if I forgive him for what he did, the debt does not somehow vanish into thin air. When I forgive him, I absorb the cost and payment for the lamp. (Either I will pay the fifty dollars to replace it or I

will lose the lighting in that room.) To forgive is to cancel the debt by paying it or absorbing it yourself. Someone *always* pays every debt.

This is the case in all situations of wrongdoing, even nonmonetary situations. When you are sinned against, you lose *something*—whether it is happiness, reputation, peace of mind, a relationship, an opportunity, or something else. There are two things to do about a sin. Imagine, for example, that someone has hurt your reputation. You can try to restore it by paying the other person back, by vilifying them and ruining *their* reputation. Or you can forgive them, refuse to pay them back, and therefore absorb the damage to your reputation. (You will have to restore it over time.)

But in all situations, when wrong is done, there is always a debt, and there is no way to deal with it without suffering—either you make the perpetrator suffer for it or you forgive and suffer for it yourself. Either you make the debtor pay by hurting them until you feel things are even or you pay by forgiving and absorbing the pain within yourself.

Forgiveness is always costly. It is emotionally very expensive—it takes much blood, sweat, and tears. So in forgiveness you pay the debt yourself in several ways:

- First, by refusing to hurt the person directly. You refuse vengeance, payback, or the infliction of pain in order to try to relieve the sense of debt you feel. Instead, you are as cordial as possible. Beware of subtle ways that we can try to exact payment in our relationship.
 - Don't make cutting remarks and drag out the past over and over.
 - Don't be far more demanding and controlling with the person than you are with others, all because you feel deep down that they still owe you.
 - Don't punish them with self-righteous "mercy" that is really a way to make them feel small and to justify yourself.
 - Don't avoid them and be cold to them in overt or more subtle ways.

- Second, by refusing to cut the person down to others. You refuse to diminish them in the eyes of others by innuendo or “spin” or hint or gossip or direct slander.
 - Don’t run them down to others under the guise of “warning” people about them.
 - Don’t run them down to others under the guise of seeking sympathy and support and sharing your hurt.
- Third, by refusing to indulge in ill will in your heart.
 - Don’t continually replay the “videotapes” of the wrong in your imagination, in order to keep the sense of loss and hurt fresh and real to you so you can stay actively hostile to the person and feel virtuous yourself.
 - Don’t vilify or demonize the offender in your imagination. Rather, recognize the common sinful humanity you share with them.

- Don't indulge in "rooting for them to fail," hoping for their pain. Instead, pray positively for their growth.

Forgiveness, then, is granted before it is felt. It is a promise to refrain from the three things above and pray for the perpetrator as you remind yourself of God's grace to you. Though it is extremely difficult and painful (you are bearing the cost of the sin yourself!), forgiveness will deepen your character, free you to talk to and help the person, and lead to love and peace rather than bitterness.

And by bearing the cost of the sin, you are walking in the path of your master (Colossians 3:13; Matthew 18:21–35). It is typical for non-Christians today to say that the cross "makes no sense." "Why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn't God just forgive us?" But *no* one who has been deeply wronged "*just* forgives"! If someone wrongs you, there are only two options: (a) you make them suffer, or (b) you refuse revenge and forgive them, and then you suffer. And if *we* can't forgive without suffering, how much more must God suffer in order to forgive us? For if *we* sense the obligation and debt

and injustice of sin unavoidably in our soul, how much more does God know it? On the cross we see God forgiving us, and that is possible only if God suffers. On the cross God's love satisfied his own justice by suffering, bearing the penalty for sin. There is never forgiveness without suffering, nails, thorns, sweat, blood. Never.

2. WHAT WE NEED IN ORDER TO FORGIVE

The experience of the gospel gives us the two prerequisites for a life of forgiveness:

Spiritual poverty or humility. You can stay bitter toward someone only if you feel superior, if you feel that you “would never do anything like that!” Those who won't forgive show they have not accepted the fact of their own sinfulness. When Paul says he is the “chief of sinners,” he is not exaggerating. He is saying that he is as capable of sin as the worst criminals are. To remain unforgiving means you remain unaware of your own need for forgiveness.

Spiritual wealth or assurance. You can't be gracious to someone if you are too needy and insecure. If you know

God's love and forgiveness, then there is a limit to how deeply another person can hurt you. He or she can't touch your *real* identity, wealth, and significance. The more we rejoice in our own forgiveness, the quicker we will be to forgive others.

Jesus says: "If you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:15). This does not mean we can earn God's forgiveness through our own forgiving but that we can disqualify ourselves from it. No heart that is truly repenting toward God could be unforgiving toward others. A lack of forgiveness toward others is the direct result of a lack of repentance toward God. And as we know, you must repent in order to be saved (Acts 2:38).

3. GOD'S FORGIVENESS AND OURS

When God reveals his glory to Moses, he says he is a God who "[*forgives*] wickedness" yet "*does not leave the guilty unpunished*" (Exodus 34:6–7). Not until Jesus do we see how God can be both completely

just and yet forgiving; it is through his atonement (1 John 1:7–9). In the cross God satisfies *both* justice and love. God was so just and desirous to judge sin that Jesus *had* to die, but he was so loving and desirous of our salvation that Jesus *was glad* to die.

We, too, are commanded to forgive, “Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone,” (Colossians 3:13) on the basis of Jesus’s atonement for our sins: “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:32).

But we are also required to forgive in a way that honors justice, just as God’s forgiveness does. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3, ESV). Since God forgives us yet in a way that honors justice, so *we* should also forgive in a way that honors justice. Christians “are called to abandon bitterness, to be forbearing, to have a forgiving stance even where the repentance of the offending party is conspicuous by its absence; on the other hand, their God-centered passion for justice, their concern for God’s glory, ensure that the awful odium of sin is not glossed over.”^[1]

4. PURSUING TRUTH, LOVE, AND RELATIONSHIP

The gospel calls us, then, to keep an equal concern (a) to speak the truth and honor what is right, yet (b) to be endlessly forgiving as we do so, and (c) to never give up on the goal of a reconciled, warm relationship.

First, God requires forgiveness whether or not the offender has repented and has asked for forgiveness. Mark 11:25: “And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive them.” This does not say “Forgive him *if* he repents” but rather “Forgive him right there—as you are praying.”

Second, God requires speaking the truth. That is why Jesus tells his disciples in Luke 17:3–4 to “rebuke” the wrongdoer and “if they repent, forgive them.” Many readers think that Jesus is saying that we can hold a grudge if the person doesn’t repent, but we can’t read Luke 17 to contradict Mark 11. Jesus is calling us here *both* to inner forgiveness *and* to rebuke and correct. We must completely surrender the right to pay back or get

even, yet at the same time we must never overlook injustice and must see serious wrongdoings redressed.

- This is almost the very opposite of how we ordinarily operate. Ordinarily we do not seek justice on the outside (we don't confront or call people to change and make restoration), but meanwhile we stay hateful and bitter on the inside. The Bible calls us to do the exact opposite. We deeply forgive on the inside so as to have no desire for vengeance, but then we are to speak openly about what has happened with a desire to help the person see what was done wrong.
- And in reality, inner forgiveness and outward correction work well together. Only if you have forgiven inside can you correct unabusively—without trying to make the person feel terrible. Only if you have forgiven already can your motive be to correct the person for God's sake, for justice's sake, for the community's sake, and for the person's sake. And only if you forgive on the inside will your speech have any hope of changing the perpetrator's heart.

Otherwise it will be so filled with disdain and hostility that he or she will not listen to you.

- Ultimately, to forgive on the inside *and* to rebuke/correct on the outside are not incompatible because they are *both* acts of love. It is never loving to let a person just get away with sin. It is not loving (a) to the perpetrator, who continues in the grip of the habit, (b) nor to the others who will be wronged in the future, (c) nor to God, who is grieved. This is difficult, for the line is very thin between moral outrage for God's sake and self-righteous outrage because of hurt pride. To refuse to confront is not loving, then, but just selfish on your part.

Third, we are to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15); we are to pursue justice gently and humbly in order to redress wrongs and yet maintain or restore the relationship (Galatians 6:1ff.).

There is a great deal of tension among these three things! Almost always, one is much

more easily attained if you simply drop any concern for another (or the other two).

For example, it is easy to “speak the truth” if you’ve given up on any desire to maintain a warm relationship. But if you want both, you will have to be extremely careful in how you speak the truth!

Another example: It is possible to convince yourself you have forgiven someone, but if afterward you still want almost nothing to do with them (you don’t pursue a continuing relationship), then that is a sign that you spoke the truth without truly forgiving.

Of course, it is possible that *you* may keep these three things together in your heart and mind but the other person simply cannot. There is no culture or personality type that holds these together. Virtually everyone will believe that “if you are confronting me, you don’t forgive/love me” or “if you really loved me, you wouldn’t be rebuking me.” God recognizes that many people simply won’t let you pursue all these things together, and so says: “As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). That is, “Do your

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part and have as good and peaceful a relationship with people as they will let you have.”

APPENDIX D

RECONCILIATION PRACTICES

1. WHEN DO WE NEED TO CONFRONT/RECONCILE?

Jesus tells us that if we have been sinned against, we may need to go and speak to the offender. “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3, ESV). But *when* do we “rebuke”? Every time anyone wrongs us? 1 Peter 4:8 (ESV) says famously that “love covers a multitude of sins,” and Proverbs 10:12 backs this up. This means we are not to be thin-skinned, and it would be wrong to bring up every matter every time we have been treated unfairly or insensitively. But passages like Matthew 18 and Luke 17 say there are some times when we

should make an appeal and complaint. When do we do so?

This is where Galatians 6 gives us guidance. “If someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted” (verse 1). We should give correction under two conditions:

- First, we should correct when the sin is serious enough to cool off or rupture the relationship. Matthew 18:15 indicates that the purpose of such a rebuke is to “win” your brother—i.e., rescue the relationship. That is implied in Galatians 6:2 (ESV) when it tells us that correcting someone is a way to “bear one another’s burdens”—it is an expression of an interdependent relationship.
- Second, we should correct when the sin against us is evidently part of a pattern of behavior that the other person is seriously “stuck” in. Galatians 6:1 (“If . . . caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore”). The image is of someone trapped in a pattern of behavior that will be harm-

ful to the person and to others. In love it should be pointed out. So we do it for the person's sake—to “restore” him. Our concern is his growth.

- And *how* do we do it? “If someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently” (Galatians 6:1). This could not be more important. If the motive of the correction is the growth of the person, then we will be loving and gentle. Verses 2 and 3 indicate that we should do this very humbly. We are making ourselves servants by doing the correction. Ultimately, any love that is afraid to confront the beloved is really not love but a selfish desire to *be* loved. Cowardice is always selfish, putting your own needs ahead of the needs of the other. A love that says, “I’ll do *anything* to keep him or her loving and approving of me!” is not real love at all. It is not loving the person—it is loving the love you get from the person. True love is willing to confront, even to “lose” the beloved in the short run if there is a chance to help him or her.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there are plenty of times when we should *not* correct and *not* “seek an apology”

even when we are owed one. The stronger a Christian you are, the less sensitive and easily hurt you will be. Thus, when people “zing” you or snub you or ignore you or let you down in some way, it should not immediately cool you off to them. A mature Christian immediately remembers (a) times when you did the same thing to others or (b) times when people who did this to you before were later revealed to have a lot on their mind and heart. If you find that any wrongdoing immediately cools you off to people and makes you need apologies, you should inquire as to the level of your own emotional humility and emotional wealth in Christ. Love should cover a multitude of sins (that is, most of them!). You should be able to treat warmly people who by rights owe you an apology but whom you haven’t corrected because the slights were rather minor or the time wasn’t right to speak about it or you didn’t know them well enough to be sure it is a major pattern in their lives.

How do you know if you have a relationship that needs reconciliation? Here are seven signs (or levels), each more serious than the one before, by which this

dynamic begins to work on the heart and cool your relationships.

- ***You roll your eyes inside and think: “You idiot. What a mess you are.”***

When you do this and there is no sadness or sympathy but instead disdain and sneering, that is the beginning of a relationship going bad, the beginning of your heart getting haughty and hard. You are calling them “raca” or “fool” in your heart.

- ***You hear about the person having a problem, and it is very satisfying.***

You realize you have tied your happiness to their unhappiness, and that is a terrible sign.

- ***You start to find most things they do irritating.***

You realize that something *that* person did is irritating or infuriating, but you would overlook it if someone else did it.

- ***You start to feel awkwardness in the relationship.***

The awkwardness might come from just one side or both sides. Awkwardness is a sense of unease when around each other.

- *You start avoiding the person.*

This can mean avoiding places you know they will be or, when in the same place, taking pains to not have to meet or talk.

- *You get a chance to pass along negative information about the person and enjoy it.*
- *You are hardly speaking to each other, and there is a lot of very obvious friction that others can see.*

Know the difference between a reconciled and an unreconciled relationship.

- An unreconciled relationship is one in which you see (a) avoidance, (b) coldness, or (c) irritability (i.e., the same action performed by another person does not disturb you as much as it does when *this* person does it!) If you find yourself avoiding or being

cold to or very irritated with the other person (or if you can tell the other person is cold or irritable or avoiding you), then you probably have an unreconciled relationship.

- On the other hand, “I forgive you” does *not* mean “I trust you.” Some people think they haven’t reconciled until they can completely retrust the person who did the wrong. That is not the case. Forgiveness means a willingness to try to reestablish trust, but that reestablishment is always a process. The speed and degree of this restoration entails the recreation of trust, and that takes time, depending on the nature and severity of the offenses involved. Until a person shows evidence of true change, we *should not* trust the person. To immediately retrust a person with sinful habits could actually be enabling him to sin. Trust must be restored, and the speed at which this occurs depends on the behavior. Just because you don’t (and shouldn’t) trust a person who wronged you as you did before doesn’t mean you don’t have a reconciled relationship with him or her.

- Note: This also applies to the people who owe you an apology but whose sins have been “covered” (see above). A person who has let you down but whom you don’t correct is someone who has damaged your trust in minor ways. If he or she comes to apologize, it would restore the trust and respect level you had before, but until that happens, you can still have a civil relationship with him or her.

2. HOW DO WE RECONCILE?

We can look at Matthew 5 and Matthew 18 as two different approaches—Matthew 5 is what you do when you believe you have (or may have) wronged someone else, while Matthew 18 is what you do when you believe someone has wronged you. But it is also possible to look at these passages as giving us two stages of the normal reconciliation process, because seldom does just one party bear all the blame for a tattered relationship. Almost always reconciliation is best done by *both* repenting *and* forgiving—by both admitting your own wrong and pointing out the wrong of the other. If we put these two approaches

together, we can create a practical outline like the one that follows.

- Stage 1 (Matthew 5 phase): Begin by confessing anything you may have done wrong.
 - Begin with yourself. Even if you believe that your own behavior is no more than 5 percent of the problem, start with your 5 percent! Look for what you have done wrong, and collect the criticism.
 - Start by listing whatever you think you have done wrong and by asking the other person to add to the list (of what he or she thinks you have done wrong or contributed to the breakdown in the relationship).
 - Example: “I’m here because I don’t like what has happened to our relationship (or—if the term applies—“our friendship”). It appears to me that there is a problem between us; am I wrong?” Or “Here is what I believe I have contributed to the problem—where I’ve wronged you and contributed to the relationship

problem. But where *else* have I wronged you or contributed to the relationship problem in your estimation?”

- If you are almost totally “in the dark” about what went wrong, you may have to simply offer to listen. Example: “It appears to me that there is trouble between us and I have offended you. Am I right? Please tell me specific ways I have wronged you. I am really ready to listen. Honest.”
- Then listen well to the criticism you’ve invited. Seek to distill the criticism of you into something clear and specific. Eventually (to do so too quickly may seem defensive), ask for as many specific examples as possible. If they say, “You are bullying,” you need to discover what actual words or actions or tones of voice strike the other person as “bullying.”

A Practical Checklist for Reconciliation:

- Pray silently, asking God to give you wisdom and to sense his love for you.
- Assume that he is speaking to you through this whole thing and is showing you ways you should be more careful or change.
- Assume he is speaking to you even through a flawed person.
- Beware of being defensive. Don't explain yourself too quickly, even if you have a good answer or can show the person he or she was mistaken. Be sure that you don't interrupt or keep the person from expressing frustration. Show sympathy even if you were misunderstood.
- Always ask, "Is there anything else? I really want to know!" In stressful situations it is easy for someone to hold back some of their complaints or concerns.

Get them all out on the table or you will be doing this again!

- Make it *safe* to criticize you—support individual criticisms with “That must have been hard; I see why you were concerned.”
- Look beneath the criticism for needs in the critic that may be there and with which you can be concerned.
- Now respond to the criticism by repenting.
 - *Please, forgive me for _____*. (This is your repentance, confession of sin.)
 - Admit it without excuses and without blaming any other circumstances. Even if there are exaggerations, extract the real fault and confess it. Even if only 10 percent of the problem is you, admit it. Provide plans for changing your behavior.
 - Don’t just “apologize” but ask for forgiveness.

- If you can think of something, say, “And here is what I am going to do to change so I will not do such a thing again in the future.” Ask him or her if there is anything you can do to restore trust. (If you really cannot see any validity in any of the criticism, ask if you can get back to the person later after checking with others about the criticism.)

- Avoid:

- Overexpressions of just “how terrible I feel over what I’ve done!” Some confessions are designed to be painful catharsis that is a way to (a) relieve one of guilt feelings (the confession is a kind of atonement/punishment) or (b) get people to provide sympathy.
- On the other hand, avoid being deadpan, light-hearted, or even flip. Confession can be done in such a way as to preserve pride, to technically fulfill the requirement, to force the other person to let you off the hook without your showing any real contrition or emotional regret at all.

- Most of all, do not make a confession that is really an attack. “If I upset you, I am sorry” is in this category. It means, “If you were a normal person, you would not have been upset by what I did.” Do not repent to the person of something that you are not going to repent to God for nor take concrete steps to change.
- “Please, accept my explanation for _____.”
 - “Here’s how I see it. Can you see that my motive or meaning was very different from what you inferred?”
 - “Can you understand my point of view? Can you accept that I could have perceived this very differently and had the motives I am describing?”
 - “Is there some way, since we see this issue so differently, that we can avoid hurting each other like this again?”
- Real repentance has three aspects:
 - confession to God

- confession to the person wronged
 - the offering of a concrete plan for change that avoids the sin in the future (cf. Luke 3:7–14)
- Stage 2 (Matthew 18 phase): Now (if necessary) address any ways that the other person has wronged you.
- If you have done all of the above, very often you will find that this approach elicits a confession from the other person without your having to ask for it or extract it! This is far and away the best way to get reconciliation!
 - If the other person is not forthcoming, begin:
“From my point of view, it looks to me like . . .
 - you did this _____,
 - and it affected me this way:
_____.
 - I think it would be far better for all concerned if instead you did this:
_____.

- I am coming to ask you if my understanding is accurate or distorted. Correct me if I am wrong. Could you explain what happened?" Be sure your list of things he or she has done is specific, not vague.
- If the other person offers an apology, grant forgiveness—but avoid using the term unless it is asked for! Say: "Well, I won't hold this against you" or "Let's put that in the past now" or "Think no more of it." To say "I forgive you" may sound humiliating.
- General guidelines for this part of the process:
 - Have a loving and humble tone. Tone of voice is extremely important. Overly controlled and nice and calm may sound patronizing and be as infuriating as fury. Don't resort to flattery and fawning syrupiness or fall into abusive or angry tones.
 - Attack the problem, not the person (e.g., not "You are so thoughtless" but "You have for-

gotten this after making repeated promises that you would not”).

- Suggest substitutes and solutions for alternative courses of action or behavior. Make sure all criticism is specific and constructive. Never say, “Don’t do this” without saying “Instead, do this.”
- In the heart of the discussion you may discover some underlying goal or need that the other person is trying to meet that could be met in more constructive ways.
- Keep in mind differences in culture. Another culture may consider your approach incredibly disrespectful and demeaning when you think you are being respectful.

Know what to do if the other person won’t be reconciled to you.

- *If it is a person who does not share your Christian beliefs:*

- Christians are commanded to seek peace and reconciliation with “everyone” (Hebrews 12:14; Romans 12:18), not just Christians. However, non-Christians may not feel the same responsibility to live in reconciled relationships.
- If that occurs, you must “take what you are given.” Romans 12:18ff. gives you a lot of good ideas about how to stay gracious, kind, open, and cordial to persons who still are being standoffish to you.

• ***If it is a Christian from your church:***

Matthew 18 indicates that if a person will not reconcile after repeated skillful efforts on your part, you should go to stage B—getting some other Christian friends (preferably who are respected by the other person) to go along with you to reconcile the relationship. If that does not work, at stage C you “tell it to the church” and ask the elders to speak to the person. There is much that can be said here, and we have done so elsewhere.

• ***If it is a Christian from some other church:***

If the person you are seeking reconciliation with is a Christian but from another region or another church, you should use the Matthew 18:15ff process as far as you can. However, if you are not both members of the same church, it may not be possible to go to the final step of “telling it to the church.” Again, you may have to “take what you are given” and live as cordially and as graciously as possible with someone who is not reconciled to you.

• ***General advice:***

- Learn to accept the apologies/repentances you get without demanding that people admit more than they honestly believe. If they repent pretty much as extensively as you feel they should, then the relationship can be almost what it was before. If they go only halfway, then you are better off, though the relationship is weakened because you still don't fully trust their wisdom and self-knowledge.

- It is usually harder to forgive someone who will not admit any wrong and who stays haughty. Internal forgiveness may be a longer process. Use all the spiritual resources we have in our faith:
 - Look at God's commands to forgive. This is our obligation.
 - Remember God's forgiveness of us. We have no right to be bitter.
 - Remember that God's omniscience is necessary to be a just judge. We have insufficient knowledge to know what others deserve.
 - Remember that we are being defeated by evil when we allow the evil to keep us in bondage through bitterness! (Romans 12 tells us to "overcome" or defeat evil with forgiveness.)
 - Remember that we undermine the glory of the gospel in the world's eyes when we fail to forgive.

3. WATCHING FROM THE SIDELINES

When two people are having a conflict with each other within the church, it can wreak a lot of havoc in the hearts and lives of the Christians around them who are not immediately involved in the dispute.

The worst thing (but the common thing!) that happens is that rather than suspending judgment and praying and encouraging the parties toward reconciliation, we take sides in the dispute in a very world-typical way.

It is hard not to sympathize with the party you know best. It is also hard for that person not to “share” his or her hurt with you in a way that vilifies the other party in the conflict.

As a result, you can have second- and third-order unreconciled relationships. That is, you feel alienated from people who are friends of the person your friend is alienated from! The problem with this is obvious—there is no direct way to heal breaches like

this. If someone is avoiding you because your friend is mad at his or her friend, there is no wrong that you can confess or repent for. It is a spiritually poisonous situation.

The problem here is not that you have sinned or have been sinned against but that you have heard a bad report about another Christian and you let it pass into your own heart and take root as distrust and hostility.

What should we do? First, see what James says about *passing along* bad reports:

- James 4:10–11. “Humble yourselves before the Lord. . . . Brothers and sisters, do not slander one another.” The verb translated as “slander” (*kata-lalein*) simply means to “speak against.” It is not necessarily a false report, just an “against-report”—one that undermines the listener’s respect and love for the person being spoken about. (“Like a north wind that brings unexpected rain is a sly tongue—which provokes a horrified look,” Proverbs 25:23.) The link of slander to pride (James 4:10) shows that

slander is not the humble evaluation of error or fault, which we must constantly be doing. Rather, in slander the speaker speaks as if he never would do the same thing himself. Nonslanderous evaluation is gentle, is guarded, and always shows that speakers sense how much they share the frailty, humanity, and sinful nature of the one being criticized. It always shows a profound awareness of your own sin. It is never “against-speaking.”

- James 5:9. “Don’t grumble [literally, don’t groan and roll your eyes] against one another.” This refers to the kind of against-speaking that is not as specific as a focused slander or attack. It is hinting with not words but body language. It means shaking heads, rolling eyes, and reinforcing the erosion of love and respect for someone else (e.g. “You know how they do things around here!”) It accomplishes the same thing as slander. It brings angry looks, and it undermines love and respect.

Second, see what the book of Proverbs says about *receiving* bad reports:

- Proverbs 17:9. “Whoever would foster love covers over an offense, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.” The first thing to do when hearing or seeing something negative is to seek to cover the offense rather than speak about it to others. That is, rather than letting it “pass in,” you should seek to keep from letting the matter destroy your love and regard for a person. How?
 - First, by remembering your own sinfulness. “All a person’s ways seem pure to them, but motives are weighed by the Lord” (Proverbs 16:2). You realize you may not be seeing things well. Your motives are never as pure as you think they are.
 - Second, by remembering there is always another side. “In a lawsuit the first to speak seems right, until someone comes forward and cross-examines” (Proverbs 18:17). You never have all the facts. You are never in a position to have the whole picture, and therefore when you hear the

first report, you should assume you have far too little information to draw a conclusion.

- Summary: If you hear a negative report about another, you must either keep it from passing in *or* go to the person, so as not to permanently lose respect for them.

What happens if you think the injustice is too great or grievous for you to ignore? In Derek Kidner's commentary on Proverbs 25:7–10 he writes that when we think someone has done wrong, we should remember, "One seldom knows the full facts (v. 8) and one's motives in spreading a story are seldom as pure as one pretends (v. 10). To run to the law or to the neighbors is usually to run away from the duty of personal relationship—see Christ's clinching comment in Matthew 18:15b."[\[1\]](#) In short, if you feel the problem is too great and you can't keep it from destroying your regard for the person, you must go to them personally before you go to anyone else.

- When? Galatians 6:1–2 says we are to go to someone if they are *caught in a trespass*. That means there should be some kind of pattern. Don't go the

first time you see or hear of someone doing wrong. As we said above, there's always another side and our motives are never totally pure when we get indignant. Galatians 6 says we should go if they seem to us "caught"—that is, in a pattern of behavior.

- How? Galatians 6 says we are to *restore gently* and in humility. Jesus in Matthew 18 says we should also do it persistently. If the person won't listen to us, take another with you whom they might listen to. Matthew 5:23ff., 18:15ff.: *reestablish broken relationships with one another*.

In summary, from the Old Testament to the New Testament, the principle is this: If you hear a bad report about another Christian, you must *either cover it with love or go to them personally before speaking of it to any others*. The first thing to do is to simply suspend judgment. The second thing to do is cover it in love. The last thing to do is go and speak to them personally. What you should never do is (a) withdraw from them or (b) pass the negative report on to others.

SUMMARY

Receiving God's forgiveness

- For the first time:
 - See your need for it and the cost of it.
 - Offer authentic repentance.
 - Understand/experience forgiveness as part of salvation.
- Ongoing forgiveness:
 - Engage in self-examination of both sins and gifts.
 - Make a confession/repent: (1) for sin, (2) for sins under sins, and (3) for danger and guilt.
 - Reexperience forgiveness as part of salvation: (1) Jesus as sacrifice, (2) Jesus as advocate, and (3) Jesus as desire of the nations.

Giving and receiving human forgiveness

- It is always your move.
- Internal forgiveness:
 - Tap resources from divine forgiveness: spiritual poverty (identifying with sinner) and spiritual wealth (identity in Christ).
 - Forgiveness is granted before it is felt. It is a promise: to not keep bringing it up to the person (apart from reconciliation offer—see below), to not keep bringing it up to others, and to not keep bringing it up to oneself.
- External reconciliation:
 - Tell the truth—name the wrong and do all justice.
 - Offer any repentance you can that is warranted; offer forgiveness, declaring the put-aside of getting even.

FORGIVE: WHY SHOULD I AND HOW CAN I?

- Overcome evil with good—more than just forgiving.
- Be open to rebuilding a trust relationship.