Elenctic Theology

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*The Christian & Forgiveness*

## The Doctrine of Forgiveness

### Introduction

#### Like many other doctrines, Christians differ on the doctrine of forgiveness. Many hold to the teaching of unconditional forgiveness, which is arguably the most popular view in the modern evangelical church, but some hold the doctrine of conditional forgiveness.

### Unconditional Forgiveness

#### The doctrine of unconditional forgiveness means, simply, that there are no conditions one must fulfill before receiving forgiveness. The Christian is obligated to forgive without requiring that any conditions, including repentance, are fulfilled prior to granting forgiveness.

#### Matthew 6:12-13 represents the several Bible passages unconditional forgiveness advocates would proffer as representative of this doctrine.

#### Representative Explanation of the Doctrine of Unconditional Forgiveness

Commenting on Matthew 6:12-13, Dr. Kenneth Bailey states:

“It is a common human assumption that the violator of the rights of others must ask for forgiveness before the wronged party can be expected to accept the apology and grant forgiveness...But Jesus here asks the person wronged to forgive the one responsible for the wrongdoing when there is no confession of guilt... There is a voice from the cross that echoes across history to all saying 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' Neither Pilate nor the high priest nor the centurion offered any apology to Jesus, yet he prayed for divine forgiveness...”[[1]](#footnote-1)

#### As such, the Unconditional Forgiveness (UF) view asserts that there are simply no conditions one must fulfill to be forgiven by a Christian.

### Conditional Forgiveness

Since the Conditional Forgiveness (CF) view is not well represented in the available literature, this section will include a more lengthy explanation of the view and a response to the unconditional forgiveness view. The proponent of conditional forgiveness would make a case as follows:

#### Unconditional Forgiveness advocates err on Matthew 6:12-13 by not considering the theological context of Matthew 6 and fail to consider any implied or presumed biblical conditions for forgiveness inherent in the statement.

#### When Dr. Bailey states, “Jesus here asks the person wronged to forgive the one responsible for the wrongdoing when there is no confession of guilt...” Bailey and others err by failing to account for the context.

##### In Matthew 6 Jesus is giving a model for prayer commensurate with the way His Kingdom works. Jesus teaches them to pray: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”

##### This is a statement of the objective, “forgiveness,” without a discussion of any express or implied conditions or presumptions to accomplish the objective.

##### It is also a statement of the proper attitude of the Christian, that is, that we must have a demeanor of being willing to forgive, just as God was willing to forgive us.

##### Hence, Bailey’s assertion that there is no “confession of guilt” or repentance necessary is merely an unwarranted assumption.

#### Moreover, the use of “as” (Grk. *hos*) in Matthew 6:12 introduces a comparison between the *way* we are to forgive and the *way* God forgives.

##### This comparative phraseology is employed elsewhere on the subject of forgiveness. For example, Ephesians 4:32 states that we should be “forgiving each other *just as* God in Christ also has forgiven” us. Here, the comparative “just as” (Grk. *kathos*) is employed and indicates our forgiveness is to be just like God’s forgiveness of us, which flows from a loving disposition.

##### So in the same manner that God forgives, Christians must forgive. Christians are to be “imitators of God” (Eph. 5:1). See also Matthew 5:48 and Luke 6:36 for exhortations to imitate God.

#### To ascertain whether the Scriptures describe any conditions for forgiveness, one must search elsewhere in the Scriptures, other than Matthew 6:12-13, for comment. This is the nature of systematic theology. Christians need to examine what the entire Bible says on a given topic, such as forgiveness. And the Bible contains ample support for the notion that there are conditions for forgiveness.

#### First, regarding God and His forgiveness, it is undisputed in orthodox Christian theology that God does not forgive everyone. The doctrine of Hell is a sufficient proof of the lack of universal forgiveness by God.

#### Next, it is clear that God does not forgive without repentance.

##### This doctrine is taught in a number of biblical texts.

###### For example, in Luke 13:3 Jesus says, “unless you *repent*, you will all likewise perish.”

###### In Mark 1:15 John the Baptist commands that we must “*repent* and believe the Gospel.”

##### The connection between repentance and forgiveness of sins (i.e. “salvation”) is seen throughout the Scriptures. For example, in Acts 2:38 repentance is commanded as a condition for the remission of sins.

##### For additional examples of this connection see Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 24:45-49; Acts 3:19; 8:22; 17:30-31; Romans 2:4-5; II Corinthians 7:10; II Tim. 2:25-26.

#### So since we are to be imitators of God and forgive in the same way God forgives, we should expect continuity in the Scriptures, that is, that the Bible would state that the condition of repentance is required to be fulfilled before believers are required to forgive sins.

#### Jesus’ Command to Imitate God’s Conditional Forgiveness

##### Jesus stated in Luke 17:3, “If your brother sins, rebuke him; and *if* he repents, forgive him.” Here, the meaning is clear.

##### The word “if” (Grk. *ean*) introduces the condition for a rebuke and for granting forgiveness.

##### If (subjunctive) a person sins, we must (imperative) rebuke him, and if (subjunctive) he repents, we must (imperative) forgive him.

##### This is as clear a statement as you will find on the subject. Forgiveness is conditioned upon repentance—and this is the same criteria that God requires before He forgives sin.

#### This principle of permitting believers to withhold forgiveness, unless the condition of repentance is satisfied, is also explicitly seen in Matthew 18:15-17.

##### Compared with the Luke 17:3 text above, the situation is the same.

##### If a brother sins, reprove him; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. Here, the word “reprove” is used rather than “rebuke” and the word “listen” is employed rather than “repent,” but the meaning is virtually identical to Luke 17:3.

##### What we see in Matthew 18 is an escalation of the issue and the result if the person fails to repent (i.e. “listen”). If the person fails to repent, we are to shun him or her in all appropriate ways (v. 17). We are not to forgive and reconcile with him.

#### These passages in Luke and Matthew give us the connection between sin, rebuke, repentance, and forgiveness. Other biblical texts that merely mention “forgiveness” as a concept or an objective do not necessarily proffer every aspect of the doctrine of forgiveness. As such, they must be read in light of the clear conditions expressed in other passages.

#### Unconditional Forgiveness Can be Harmful

##### The advocate for conditional forgiveness would make the case that it is sometimes or often harmful to a person to forgive him or her without requiring repentance.

##### As seen above, the Bible is clear that sin requires a rebuke.

##### Ignoring sin teaches sinners that sin does not bring consequences.

##### This is harmful to their souls and eternal destiny.

##### Continuing to have the benefit of a righteous relationship with another and yet remain in sin against that person results in fostering a habituation of sinful inclinations in their soul, which God says brings about suffering and death.

#### Conditional Forgiveness & Reconciliation

##### Since the ultimate purpose of forgiveness is reconciliation, it is meaningless and often harmful to forgive when no reconciliation may be had with the sinner.

##### People cannot “walk together” in a biblical manner in righteous peace when the unrepentant sinner walks in unrighteousness.

##### Necessarily, there is a conflict and a want of shalom.

##### Their soul is headed in a different direction than the believer’s soul; they are walking away from God and we cannot have fellowship with darkness.

##### God has no intimate fellowship with unrepentant, sinful people, and that is the model for Christians as well (See Matt. 18).

#### Distinguishing Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Related Concepts

##### One can and should distinguish forgiveness and reconciliation—along with all of the other aspects associated with restoring broken relationships, such as desire, anger, wrath, guilt, penalties and other associated concepts.

##### However, the context of this discussion is not a commercial or economic type of forgiveness. It is forgiveness related to a broken personal relationship and personal offenses. And as such, fellowship or *koinonia* through reconciliation is the *telos* or goal of forgiveness.

##### Moreover, forgiveness is biblically understood as not holding the sin or offense against the sinner and treating him or her with love, kindness, and compassion. The unconditional forgiveness view does not fit the context of texts on the subject such as Luke 17 and Matthew 18 where it says to treat the unrepentant person “as a pagan and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17). These descriptions on how we are to treat unrepentant people are consistent with how God treats the unrepentant.

##### For example, in Romans 1:18 the wrath of God is revealed towards the unrepentant in that He “gives people over” to the consequences of their sin as a punishment.

###### The word for “give over” (*paradidomi*) has a judicial aspect that denotes handing over for punishment.

###### God is not seen as merely choosing not to reconcile with sinners. He is also angry with them and has chosen not to forgive them. As such, they are under punishment.

###### In Rev. 19:15 we see this divine anger (*thymos*) expressed in punishment. It says, “From His mouth comes a sharp sword, so that with it He may strike down the nations, and He will rule them with a rod of iron; and He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty. And on His robe and on His thigh He has a name written, “KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.” (Rev. 19:15-16)

#### Hating Sin & Forgiveness

##### God hates sin and sinners in all *appropriate* ways.

##### Humans fail to *properly* hate sin and sinners.

##### Humans should be angry in appropriate ways (Rom. 12:9; Eph.4:26, 31).

##### There is a time to love and a time to hate (Ecclesiastes 3:8).

##### The human sin problem here is that righteous anger can evolve beyond the biblical limits to become malice, slander, and bitterness, which is sin.

##### So the problem is not *per se* a lack of forgiveness or hate. It is that Christians often do not follow the biblical mandate on *how* and *when* to do these things in appropriate ways.

#### Withholding Forgiveness & Psychological Problems

##### Some allege that withholding forgiveness results in psychological harm to the person who refuses to forgive unconditionally.

##### The conditional forgiveness advocate holds that when unresolved personal anger issues are raised by Christian psychologists and counselors, these types of psychologists and counselors are unbiblically make unconditional forgiveness a part of therapy, as demonstrated above.

##### By contrast, however, if a counselee will not forgive someone after the offending party has truly and genuinely repented, the counselee sins—and this kind of unforgiveness may be one of the causes of his or her problems. But this is a separate issue from the universal and unconditional forgiveness issues raised above.

##### God Himself is eternally angry with sin and does not forgive unrepentant sinners, but He is certainly not sinning or psychologically troubled.

###### God loves, hates, and is angry in appropriate ways.

###### The Christian task as believers is to imitate God by being angry with and hating sin appropriately (Rom. 12:9) and loving what good appropriately.

###### For example, righteous anger can evolve beyond the biblical limits to become malice, slander, and bitterness while an appropriate love of food can evolve beyond the biblical limits into gluttony.

##### Psychological problems arise from many issues other than lack of forgiveness.

###### For example, a lack of trust in God that He has a particular instance of evil under His sovereign control can cause undue anxiety in one’s life.

###### Also, if a counselee’s self-worth is grounded in the shifting sand of how others treat him or her (i.e., sinfully) rather than being grounded in the fact that he or she is a divine image bearer and inherently valuable no matter how badly anyone treats him or her, he or she will likely fall into anxiety, depression, and other sorts of psychological maladies.

###### Changing the biblical doctrine of conditional forgiveness will not truly help a counselee. It only makes it worse.

### Discussion & Further Applications

1. Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Press, 2008), 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)