

What Does
the Bible
Say About... ?

Forgiveness

“What Does the Bible Say About...?” Series

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Series Editor

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Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about FORGIVENESS.”

Introduction

A good friend of mine, a nun, is known to all for her kindness and gentle spirit. So it was a surprise to hear her begin a parish Lenten talk by confessing that when she is driving, she turns into a maniac. All of a sudden she is mentally labeling her fellow drivers as jerks and worse. Somehow with the anonymity of closed windows and the power of a couple tons of steel around her, she is transformed into a self-righteous and violent adversary. How is that possible, when most other drivers are going about their business apparently not wishing her any harm and without even knowing her? This is only one example of how the stresses of our daily contemporary life strain the limits of our attitudes toward others. And it is really no surprise after all.

Our Disconnected World

Driving and traffic are for many of us only among the minor pressures we face. Our interpersonal relationships in our families and our workplaces suffer from limitations of time and energy. Efforts to communicate clearly, despite social media, the Internet, and cell phones, leave us unsatisfied. People feel lonelier, less understood, more disconnected, and even more unloved than ever before, as evidenced by our divorce rates, litigations, homicides, suicides, and other social ills. We look to anyone or any-

thing that claims to help us shed some light on the causes of our restlessness and discontent. We live in an age of polarization, exemplified by an inability to admit when we are wrong. Instant and constant news bombards our senses and we often respond emotionally and strongly. There is in our world a lot to make us feel angry, upset, and anxious. Yet our society offers few calming influences.

Such signs of the times can result in confusion about forgiveness, the need to be forgiven, and the need to forgive. A good starting point is honesty about ourselves. We are imperfect. God isn't finished with us yet. In prayer we ask God for forgiveness for ourselves and we ask for the grace to forgive others. We dare to ask this regularly in the Lord's Prayer, although we might not realize the commitment required by the words that prioritize forgiveness right up there with longing for the kingdom and receiving our daily bread.

We need forgiveness ourselves, for our part in straining relationships in our families and among our loved ones. We often need forgiveness from all the "others" in our lives such as neighbors, employers, and co-workers, people we encounter on a daily basis but do not really notice and certainly do not understand. We require forgiveness even from our friends, and we need to forgive them, too, on a regular basis. As members of the Church we identify ourselves as a forgiven and forgiving people. It is not surprising that we will never be able to solve our multi-faceted problems without learning to overlook our misunderstandings, to heal our mutual suspicions, and to mend our broken promises by forgiving one another on the way to peace.

A Kinder, Gentler World

The term forgiveness includes the word “give” at its heart. This is true in languages besides English, such as German (*Vergeben*) and French (*pardonner*). The prefix “for” suggests both anticipation of a reaction and also the idea that it is “on behalf of” another. Whereas we might naturally retaliate or expect retribution, forgiveness instead calls us to offer and accept gratuitous, often undeserved pardon. It might also mean that when others cannot for some reason be “giving,” we must be giving first. Forgiveness often includes the element of surprise. An offender expects a certain reaction in kind. But when we are forgiven for our limitations or outright faults and failings, and especially when, through kindness, we realize that we have been forgiven much, we stand a chance of changing expectations and, hopefully, also behavior. Forgiveness tends to have a ripple effect. It is progressive. We learn forgiveness and its power as we act in forgiving, gracious ways. Forgiveness is, above all, a gift, one that keeps on giving. Ultimately forgiveness can be beneficial even if it is one-sided. Forgiveness is most important and effective for the one who seeks it or who seeks to offer it.

With so many aspects to forgiveness, we need guidance. Believers search the Scriptures as a primary source of revelation and inspiration. There we seek not only comfort but also the challenge to go beyond ourselves, not so much for confirmation but enlightenment. Forgiveness is a theme found prominently throughout the Bible. Some passages most pertinent to the topic might not even use the

word *forgiveness*. But the theme persists in importance. For instance, Jesus' commands to "love one another" and to "love our enemies" give us no room to shelter in bitterness, animosity, or the self-pity of having been wronged. The teachings of the Church also provide constantly updated applications of the Bible's directives on forgiveness as they may be understood in an increasingly complex world. In particular, documents that have appeared in the past fifty years, some very recently in the writings of Pope Francis, have much to say about forgiveness. Fortunately there are also models to whom we can turn, teachers of the way toward reconciliation: a kind of litany of forgivers, such as Nelson Mandela, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Paul of Tarsus, and Jesus himself. What they teach about forgiveness enhances our humanity and challenges us to be better than we might think we are capable of being.

Any book on such a wide-ranging topic as forgiveness has to be selective and incomplete. I simply offer some thoughts on how forgiveness is both required of us according to the Bible and offered to us as grace, freedom, and the peace needed to live a good life. Forgiveness is a necessity of life, like food and water. Every day we fall short of our own aspirations and intentions and therefore need to be forgiven. And every day we are called upon to overlook the failings of others and personify the power of forgiveness in things both great and small.

Faithfulness in Small and Large Things

In the parable of the talents, Jesus praised the good and faithful servants, saying that their dependability in small things means they can be entrusted with large things. Jesus concludes with the invitation, “Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21, 23). This lesson can be applied to the topic of forgiveness. Practicing forgiveness in small things is like an investment in our ability to accept life on life’s terms when we encounter larger obstacles and disappointments. Forgiveness can empower us to turn bad things into good, sorrow and hurt into joy, for ourselves and for others, when we work at it.

At certain times in life we may be faced with the challenge to forgive in a very large sense. Very painful experiences, such as divorce, betrayal, abuse, false accusations, and even something definitive like a tragic death of a loved one, could stretch us far beyond what we might have previously imagined ourselves to be capable of. We stand at a crossroad. How we choose to act could set us on a course of either additional destructive responses or healing of ourselves and others. Faced with injustice, we have options. We may be tempted to retaliate in kind or even escalate the cycle that produced the rupture. We may seek the satisfaction of revenge, demanding a “pound of flesh.” But the far better way is forgiveness. This more measured and grace-filled response requires help, practice, and determination to seek both justice and mercy. This is the longer road to peace of mind and heart.

Alongside these challenges, we realize that there are many factors in our world that keep orienting us, as even the ancient Greeks maintained, to our common goals of good, beauty, truth, and unity. Pope Francis challenges us, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, to respond to God's call to holiness. He highlights five "great expressions of love of God and neighbor" that he considers of particular importance in the light of certain dangers and limitations present in today's culture.¹ These include a solid grounding in the God who loves and sustains us and gives us inner strength. A second sign of holiness is joy combined with a sense of humor. The third is boldness and passion, while the fourth expression of holiness is community. Finally, Pope Francis says, we should remember that holiness consists in habitual openness to the transcendent, expressed in prayer. These are also the gifts that enable us to offer and receive forgiveness, one of the surest signs of grace, God's own life and power present in us.

Chapter One

Forgiveness Becomes Us

A dear friend died recently. Sensing death was near, she expressed a strong desire to talk to and confess to a priest. As she was not a Catholic, she asked if this was possible and later, if it was surprising. The visit was arranged and she said she needed time to prepare for it. Afterward she stated that she really had no idea how very consoling and important it would be for her to hear the words, “I absolve you . . .” She added that previously she had not realized the power of forgiveness.

Forgiveness Makes Us Strong

With forgiveness, our world expands, and we are restored and renewed. Forgiveness is communication. It implies a dynamic of extending and accepting, offering and receiving. Ideal forgiveness might be unconditional. But in practice, forgiveness often comes with conditions, meaning that if we are to learn its lessons, we must somehow acknowledge mistakes, express remorse, and resolve to do better. We learn by experience that forgiveness *becomes* us. True forgiveness means that we go beyond simply agreeing

to “forgive and forget,” for that would mean that we lose the most important element of forgiveness, which is that we are bettered by the experience. Making amends helps us become more understanding, more compassionate, and more accepting of our own humanity and that of others. Absolution is in fact empowering, but only if we allow its grace to permeate our attitude toward ourselves and others.

A worldview based on getting even, remembering and nursing grudges, wallowing in self-pity, or taking the fight to every argument is hopeless. The Bible offers an alternative rooted in a consistent covenant awareness. We have a “deal” with God that we will live up to the covenant’s terms, expressed simply as, “I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Jeremiah 7:23; also Ezekiel 36:28). We often fall short of this agreement, so we have come to expect forgiveness because it is so necessary. As people belonging to God we thereby have an obligation to forgive others. Forgiveness rather than retribution is the covenant’s standard.

The Vocabulary of Forgiveness in the Bible

The Old Testament understands forgiveness within the context of God’s covenant with Israel. God is the holy and faithful covenant partner, while Israel consistently sins, falling short of her calling as God’s people. The Hebrew term *kipper* can mean “to cover, to make atonement,”² as when Ezekiel describes the offerings that make atonement for the house of Israel (45:15, 17, 20). Another term, *ratsah*,

can be translated “reconcile” (1 Samuel 29:4). The NRSV most often translates the Hebrew *m’hilah* in the Psalms as “pardon.” The term *forgiveness* or *pardon* is regularly found in prayers, often with no other motivation than God’s own goodness. Thus, Psalm 25:11 pleads, “For your name’s sake, O LORD, / pardon my guilt, for it is great.” Even the pharaoh acknowledged his sin against the God of Israel and asked for forgiveness, pleading with Moses and Aaron, “I have sinned against the LORD your God, and against you. Now therefore, forgive my sin, I pray you, only this once, and entreat the LORD your God only to remove this death from me” (Exodus 10:16–17). Sometimes conditions for forgiveness are made explicit, such as confession of sin, conversion, and prayer (e.g., Hosea 14:2). Certain sins such as pride (Isaiah 2:9) or idolatry (Deuteronomy 29:19) can be obstacles that must be overcome so that forgiveness will take place. The people long for forgiveness, which is seen as an eschatological blessing (Isaiah 58:6, 61:1), indicating that by themselves they cannot achieve it.

Forgiveness allows a fresh start, a new beginning with a renewed spirit. Consistently forgiveness is viewed as unmerited gift. Righteous leaders sometimes intercede for the people, acknowledging their sin and asking for God’s merciful, gratuitous forgiveness even though the people do not deserve it. Thus, over and over, Moses intercedes for a “stubborn and stiff-necked people” (e.g., Exodus 32:9). We see people asking God to forgive many because of the goodness of a few. Abraham asks for forgiveness for Sodom and Gomorrah if even a very small number of righteous people