

CHAPTER 12

WHAT IS REALLY MEANT BY FORGIVING OTHERS AND WHAT DOES IT INVOLVE?

¹² There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour?

James 4:12 (ESV)

¹¹ 'Give us this day our daily bread.

¹² 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

Matthew 6:11-12 (NASB)

Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.

1 John 3:15 (RSV)

*Do not say, "I will do to him as he has done to me;
I will pay the man back for what he has done."*

Proverbs 24:29 (RSV)

The duty to forgive people rather than judge them – first of all we have to realise that we are not authorised to judge anybody

We can see from the above passages that we are commanded not to judge other people. Instead, we are told to forgive them, and that very serious consequences will follow if we don't. In short, God will not forgive us unless we are willing to forgive others. That puts a heavy duty upon us in what can frequently be a difficult and painful area.

In particular, it also makes it essential that we know exactly what forgiveness is. Then we can make sure that what we do meets the biblical definition of forgiveness and that we are not missing the mark, either by doing too little, or trying to do too much.

Some people set the bar too low and therefore assume that they are being forgiving when, in fact, they aren't. Probably a larger number make the opposite error and set the bar too high. Then they assume that forgiveness is far too hard for them to achieve. In fact, they are trying to do more than merely 'forgiving' the other person and are going farther than the Bible actually requires of us.

Therefore, in this chapter, we will examine the vital link between *not judging* people and *forgiving* them. These two commands go together and need to be understood as a combined package. We will also look at exactly what forgiveness is, how it works, why it matters, and how to actually forgive people, and avoid bitterness, in practical terms.

We shall also look carefully at what forgiveness *isn't* and what it *doesn't* involve. We need to do this because forgiving others is such a badly misunderstood subject. It gets mixed up with, or mistaken for, many other things which are closely related to forgiveness, but are actually separate and distinct.

For many years, I personally found it hard to define forgiveness, i.e. to know exactly what was being required of me. I was not helped by any of the preaching I ever heard in any church. If anything, the few sermons that I did hear on forgiveness tended to add to the confusion. They also promoted a general feeling of failure and that forgiveness of others is too difficult for most of us to achieve.

When people come to the conclusion that forgiveness is too difficult, or even impossible, it is often because they are wrongly defining it. In particular, they are probably including within its definition some or all of these other things, such as mercy, grace, reconciliation and the resumption of trust and friendship.

Admittedly, they are all linked to forgiveness, and often accompany it, but they go beyond forgiveness and are not part of its basic definition. So, when a person says, “*I have tried to forgive, but it’s impossible. I just can’t do it*”, the chances are that what they really mean is that they can’t be *reconciled* with the wrongdoer.

Or, they may mean that they can no longer *trust* the wrongdoer, or that they still feel *violated* or *angry* or *hurt*. But the point is that a person can validly and genuinely forgive a wrongdoer and yet still continue to feel any or all of the following things:

- a) hurt and emotionally upset
- b) wounded, violated or traumatized
- c) anger (which must not be confused with holding a grudge or feeling bitterness or rage – see below)
- d) distrustful and wary
- e) unreconciled and unwilling even to attempt reconciliation, at least for the time being
- f) unable to relate to the wrongdoer or to have fellowship with them or work alongside them
- g) unwilling to give them another chance, at least for now, for fear that they will do it again

Many people have been put under condemnation by misinformed preachers, or have made themselves feel condemned, for being unable or unwilling to forgive. Yet the real issue is often their inability or unwillingness to do something else, which is not actually a part of the definition of forgiveness at all. So, when people speak of forgiveness, or even when the Bible speaks of it, we always need to ask what the context is and work out exactly what is being referred to, or required of us.

Sometimes what is meant is just the narrowest, most basic definition of forgiveness. Then again, at other times, it may be that what is being spoken of is the same basic forgiveness plus some other related concept(s) alongside it, or together with it. We therefore need to be able to identify, at any given time, exactly what the Bible is referring to, or commanding us to do. Then we can be clear as to what we must do, so that we do not attempt to do more than is required of us in the circumstances we face.

The narrowest, most basic definition of forgiveness – to ‘recuse yourself’, as a Judge does when he feels he is the wrong person to try a case.

If you want to buy a car, you are well aware that you can get them at varying levels of specification, even for the same model. You can have a car which is at the bottom of the manufacturer’s range and is not much more than a chassis with wheels and an engine. Or, you can have the same model, but at the top of the range, with various extras such as air conditioning, alloy wheels, satellite navigation, leather seats etc.

They are both a car. Indeed, they may even be the same model of car, but one is basic and the other has a number of extra features. It is a little bit like that when we speak of forgiveness. In one

situation we might mean basic forgiveness, at its narrowest definition. On another occasion we might mean an enlarged or wider definition, with extra features included.

Our starting place, therefore, is to try to identify the narrowest, most basic, definition of forgiveness, when it is looked at without any added features. I would say that at its lowest and simplest level, forgiveness essentially means that we ‘*step aside*’ and ‘*hand the person over to Jesus*’.

That is we *leave their judgment to Him*, so that He can judge them, and possibly even punish them, instead of us seeking to do any of that to them ourselves, which we are neither qualified, nor authorized, to do.

When writing this chapter I asked God to help me to explain the connection between the command not to judge others and the command to forgive people. I also asked for help in explaining this process of ‘stepping aside’ and ‘handing over’ to Jesus the judgment of someone who has wronged us.

Finally, I asked Him to give me an analogy, so as to make clear exactly how it all works and what is the minimum that we have to do in order to ‘forgive’. I believe He gave me one and that it may be helpful. The analogy is to think of a judge who realises that he is not the right person to hear a particular case.

It could be because, for example, the defendant is a personal friend or even an enemy. Or, he could be a neighbour or colleague or a relative of his. That judge therefore realises that he cannot give that defendant a fair trial, or that it would be unsafe, or even corrupt, for him to try to involve himself in that man’s case.

When a judge is in that situation he will contact the court office and ask one of the clerks to remove that defendant’s case from his own list and put it onto the list of some other judge instead. When a judge does that, so as to prevent himself from hearing a case that is unsuitable for him to hear, we say that he has ‘*recused*’ himself.

That means he has rejected himself as the judge, due to being unsuitable to handle that case. Or you could say that he has ‘objected to himself’ being the judge. By taking that sensible precautionary step he makes sure that he himself is not the judge of that particular case and that it is transferred to someone else, who is more suitable to deal with it.

I would suggest to you that when we are commanded to ‘forgive’ others, the Bible is often speaking of forgiveness in its narrowest sense. If so, then what we are being commanded to do is effectively to ‘*recuse ourselves*’. That is to stop seeing ourselves as the right person to judge and punish whoever it is that has wronged us.

Then we are required to hand their ‘case’ over to Jesus and let Him judge, and perhaps punish, the wrongdoer while we play no further part in any of it. Most of the time, unless the context, or the precise words used, indicate a wider or larger meaning, then that is all that we are being required to do. It should be a comfort to us to realise that, because when it is defined very narrowly in this way, forgiveness is exclusively a decision of the will and thus much easier to achieve.

At its most basic level, forgiveness is purely a decision of the will, not an emotion or feeling

Indeed, basic forgiveness, without the involvement of any other added features, is achievable by all of us, and on every occasion. That is because it is a pure *decision*. It does not involve anything further or wider or deeper than simply deciding to step aside and leaving the judgment of that person to Jesus. In particular, it need not involve our emotions, over which we have no direct control. That is why God never commands us what to *feel*, but only what to *do* or *say*.

Our speech and our actions are always within our power to control and to alter, whereas our emotions and feelings aren't. Realising that one simple fact might enable you to make a breakthrough and to discover that forgiveness, at least by its narrow definition, is possible after all. Indeed, it is always possible, no matter what the circumstances are.

That said, there are some times where we see characters in the Bible going further than the basic definition of forgiveness. We see them showing mercy and grace to the wrongdoer, being reconciled to him, working together with him and re-establishing trust and close personal friendship etc. But, where such things occur, they are going beyond what we are ordinarily commanded to do. That is because there may be circumstances where God would want us to go further than basic forgiveness.

However, if He does, we need to realise that we are doing something additional, which goes beyond the narrow definition of forgiveness. If we mistakenly think that the command to forgive always includes being able to do *all* of these other things, and to their fullest extent, then we are likely to become confused and also discouraged by the size and difficulty of the task.

Therefore, the reality is that we can obey the basic command to forgive without necessarily going so far as to do any of those additional things. When you realise that, it can be tremendously liberating. You suddenly discover that you are actually capable of forgiving people, even those who have wronged you very badly, and even those who are continuing to wrong you.

So, if you find that you are not presently able to go further than basic forgiveness, i.e. recusing yourself, it is *not* necessarily a sign that you have not genuinely forgiven the wrongdoer. It could be that, in your circumstances, all that God is asking of you, at least for the moment, is basic forgiveness, without any of those other things.

Of course, it could also be that you are not genuinely forgiving the person. But we are not entitled to arrive at that conclusion based solely on the fact that you do not currently feel able to go beyond basic forgiveness. We would need to know quite a lot more about the facts of the situation in order to say whether God is requiring you to go any further than that at present and, if so, what exactly you should do.

So, the starting point for real forgiveness, as narrowly defined, is realising that you are not the one who has been appointed to judge the world. That judicial appointment has already been made. The position has been given to Jesus Christ and He will, one day, fully perform that role.

When you grasp that the judging, sentencing and punishing of other people is what Jesus alone is going to do, and that He really will do it, then you will also realise that you don't need to and, secondly, that you are not authorized to do so. It's all going to be dealt with by Him, and only by Him. Nobody else is either worthy to do it, or capable of it, whereas He is.

Moreover, you can be fully confident that He will judge every person, including the one who has wronged you. Grasping that last fact is vital, because it helps you to 'step aside' and let Jesus handle the wrongdoer's 'case'. You can be sure that the wrong done to you is not being forgotten about, or ignored, and that justice really will be done.

Furthermore, when Jesus judges people, nothing will be overlooked, mishandled or misunderstood, whereas they would be if you or I were the judge. There is therefore no need for you to bring forward the Day of Judgment for the wrongdoer by seeking to handle his case yourself now.

More importantly, it would be *wrong* for you to try to form a judgment of him, and to punish him now, before the appointed time. You are not capable of it and you have no right to attempt it. Only Jesus can properly judge the wrongdoer. We are therefore commanded to leave it all to Him and not to interfere or usurp His position:

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

Romans 12:19 (NASB)

There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour?

James 4:12 (ESV)

Let's remind ourselves that Jesus, and only Jesus, is authorised to conduct the final judgments

Let's look more closely at these final Judgments that are going to be conducted by Jesus. We know that He will judge the whole world, one at a time, and face to face. That includes the person who has wronged you. However, you need to realise that it also includes you because, so far as some other people are concerned, *you* are the wrongdoer. At least, you are *their wrongdoer*, so far as *they* can see.

Therefore you are the one that they are commanded to forgive. Holding that sobering fact in mind is very helpful. It provides us with a more balanced perspective on this whole subject of forgiveness, as we begin to turn our minds to the question of how and why we should forgive the man who has wronged us.

Remember that somewhere in your neighbourhood there are people who may be trying to come to terms with their duty to forgive *you*. The more you can keep that fact in mind, the easier this issue of forgiveness will become, and the more it will make sense. At any rate, here are a few sample passages which deal with what Jesus will do when He judges us all, both Christians and non-Christians, i.e. the saved and the unsaved:

At the set time which I appoint

I will judge with equity.

Psalm 75:2 (RSV)

But thou, terrible art thou!

Who can stand before thee when once thy anger is roused?

Psalm 76:7 (RSV)

Then the trees of the forest will sing for joy before the LORD;

For He is coming to judge the earth.

1 Chronicles 16:33 (NASB)

And He will judge the world in righteousness;

He will execute judgment for the peoples with equity.

Psalm 9:8 (NASB)

Before the LORD, for He is coming,

For He is coming to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness

And the peoples in His faithfulness.

Psalm 96:13 (NASB)

³¹*because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."*

Acts 17:31 (NASB)

¹⁶*on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.*

Romans 2:16 (NASB)

So, Jesus is the only one in the whole universe who is authorised to judge human beings. The role of Judge has been assigned to Him, and only to Him. It is not for us to do it, either now or later. Realising that is the vital starting point in considering this whole subject of avoiding judging others and engaging instead in forgiveness, i.e. *basic* forgiveness.

As we saw, that essentially amounts to stepping aside, or recusing ourselves, and leaving the judging to Jesus. Given all of that, you might then ask why we have courts in this world in which people get judged here and now by human judges. Are they wrong to do that? The answer is no, because any person who is appointed by the State to be a judge is actually put there by God.

A human judge, who has been officially and validly appointed, as opposed to illegitimately self-appointed, has been temporarily delegated a tiny portion of Jesus' authority to judge. So, unless of course he is corrupt, which, sadly can be the case in some countries, a human judge in a court of law is not doing anything wrong. When he does his job he is not disobeying Jesus' command not to judge others.

In fact, he is doing God's will by providing a legitimate foretaste of God's justice and punishment where it is needed. That is entirely different from each of us illegitimately judging our fellow men, when we have not been appointed by God to do so. Indeed, each of us are directly commanded not to judge others:

¹⁰ But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹ For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹² So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God. ¹³ Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.
Romans 14:10-13 (NASB)

⁵ Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God.

1 Corinthians 4:5 (NASB)

We are commanded to forgive others – it isn't optional

We are commanded not to judge others. On top of that, we also have a positive duty to forgive them. Moreover, we are not merely advised to do so. We are commanded to forgive. It is stated very clearly and on many occasions, for example:

³⁷ "Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned.

Luke 6:37 (NASB)

³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.

Ephesians 4:31-32 (NASB)

²¹ "You have heard that the ancients were told, 'you shall not commit murder' and 'Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.' ²² "But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever says to his brother, 'You good-for-

nothing,' shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.

Matthew 5:21-22 (NASB)

¹⁴*"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.*

¹⁵*"But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.*

Matthew 6:14-15 (NASB)

Moreover, it is assumed by God that we will obey these commands to forgive others. In what has come to be known as "the Lord's prayer", which really ought to be called 'the disciples' prayer', Jesus shows us the manner, style and attitude that we need to have when praying to God. We are not meant to say this prayer by rote, as most people seem to do, but to see it as a model or precedent.

At any rate, the point is that in praying for God to forgive us, Jesus assumes that we have already forgiven others, i.e. at least stepped aside and left their cases to be judged by Him. It is taken as a given. Or you could say that it is treated as a combined package of events. That is He links together our forgiveness of others with God's forgiveness of us.

In this instance, what Jesus is referring to goes beyond basic, narrowly-defined forgiveness. It also includes a duty to release others from their debts to us, i.e. the guilt of their sins, in the same way that we want God to release us from our debts to Him, i.e. the guilt of our sins:

¹¹ *'Give us this day our daily bread.*

¹² *'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.*

Matthew 6:11-12 (NASB)

But Jesus goes further than just telling us to forgive others, or to release them from their guilt or debt to us. He also states that unless we forgive others, God will not forgive us. That is a very worrying statement, but it is clearly what He said:

²⁵*"Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions. ²⁶"But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions."*

Mark 11:25-26 (NASB)

So, that is clearly the command. We have to forgive others. That therefore makes it all the more essential that we know what exactly we must do and how exactly we are meant to do it, in practical terms. We have to ask, what is real forgiveness and how can we be sure that we have achieved it in our own particular circumstances? We shall therefore examine forgiveness more closely in the pages below and try to answer these questions fully.

In particular, we shall need to look further at the definition (or definitions) of forgiveness and get very clear on what it does, *and doesn't*, include. How else can we know whether we have obeyed the command to forgive others unless we know exactly what forgiveness involves, and how far we have to go?

How many times are we supposed to forgive people?

The apostle Peter asked Jesus a question which must have occurred to most of us - how many times are we expected to forgive people? Is there a limit? What if they just carry on sinning against us, again and again? Jesus answered Peter by telling him a story:

²¹*Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" ²²Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but*

up to seventy times seven. ²³"For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves.

²⁴"When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. ²⁵"But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. ²⁶"So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.'

²⁷"And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸"But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' ²⁹"So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.'

³⁰"But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. ³¹"So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. ³²"Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³'Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' ³⁴"And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. ³⁵"My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart."

Matthew 18:21-35 (NASB)

The above parable about waiving the debts (sins) of others, in the same way that we want God to forgive our sins, is alarming. I say that because Jesus concludes it by saying that God the Father will do the same with us as the King did to the man who failed to forgive. But the King in the story responded harshly. He did not merely re-impose the financial debt. He also handed the man over to be punished by "the torturers".

My understanding of that is as follows. We are commanded to forgive other people, at least in the narrow sense of stepping aside and leaving it to Jesus to judge them. Possibly, we may be required to go even further than that, by releasing them from their debt or guilt towards us.

However, if we will not do these things, then God will respond by allowing demons greater and greater access to us. They will then create additional difficulties for us until, under all of that pressure, we eventually come to realise our duty to forgive others and release them from their debts or guilt, just as we want God to release us from ours.

That point about the 'torturers' actually matches our experience in practice. A person who is in a state of unforgiveness, i.e. one who still wants to judge the wrongdoer themselves, and will not release them, will have a very difficult time, especially if they are bitter and vengeful. All sorts of other things will begin to go wrong for them.

That may seem unfair, given that they were wronged in the first place. Even so, it is what we have seen happen in our own lives, and in other people's lives, when there is unforgiveness and bitterness. Part of the rationale behind all of this is that we ourselves have been forgiven many things. Indeed, God's forgiveness of us is broadly defined and goes well beyond the narrow definition of forgiveness, which is the minimum that is required of us.

Therefore, what right do we have to withhold even the narrowest form of forgiveness from others, and yet seek it ourselves, and in the widest possible sense, for our own sins? Quite apart from the unfairness of that, there is also the fact that we are not authorised to judge anybody in the first place.

'Forbearance' - the duty to tolerate each other and to put up with each other's sins, faults and irritating ways

Forbearance is another concept which is closely linked to forgiveness but is still separate and distinct. Sometimes we become alienated from others, or do not get on with them, not necessarily because they have wronged us or harmed us, but simply because we do not like them. We are all very different and our ways, habits, mannerisms etc can be very irritating.

If this is not dealt with promptly, and in the right way, it can produce relationship problems, the effects of which are not much less than if we had been wronged. Moreover, if people do not get on, or if they irritate each other, they can eventually get to the stage where they do start to do actual wrong to each other, such that they really would have a need to forgive and be forgiven. Therefore, we also have a duty to show forbearance.

This is an aspect of forgiveness, albeit usually not at the fullest level, because it also applies even where people have not wronged us. It means to be patient and to put up with each other's sins, faults, weaknesses, annoying habits and minor acts of rudeness. Forbearance involves being slow to anger and tolerating such things, rather than reacting carnally to them. That is how God wants each of us to be, if we claim to be Christians:

¹²Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, ¹³forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

Colossians 3:12-15 (RSV)

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3 (RSV)

Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand.

Philippians 4:5 (RSV)

If God was short-tempered, touchy, irritable, resentful, easily offended and prone to holding onto grudges, as we often tend to be, then none of us could relate to Him at all. He would be able to find far more to object to in us than we can legitimately object to in each other. Thankfully, that is not how He is. He is gracious and slow to anger. That involves Him being patient with us and putting up with our many faults, bad habits and selfish ways:

*³ If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
O Lord, who could stand?*

Psalm 130:3 (ESV)

*⁸ The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

*⁹ The LORD is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.*

Psalm 145:8-9 (ESV)

So, forbearance is a *part* of what forgiveness is about. It primarily concerns the lesser things which are at the 'shallow end' of what we are called upon to forgive. It basically means putting up with it when people behave selfishly, foolishly, rudely or thoughtlessly. Yet, forbearance is still very important because it is likely that more relationships are undermined or destroyed because of minor

irritations and personality clashes than by major situations, where one person has been seriously wronged by another.

The little pin pricks may be trivial in themselves, but they may mount up over time and their eventual consequences can be major, if we are not willing to practice the art of forbearance. However, if we can develop forbearance and make the effort to put up with things and get along with people that we don't naturally like, then everybody will benefit.

This has not been an area of strength for me. I find I am too easily irritated by others and so I need to work at this much harder. God wants us all to make a bigger effort to get along with other Christians, and to be slow to anger. We are to tolerate their faults, and also their habits and ways, even where they are not necessarily at fault, but are merely different from us:

*Behold, how good and pleasant
it is when brothers dwell in unity!*
Psalm 133:1 (ESV)

God also wants us to encourage those who fail and lift up those who fall, whether it is into sin or other problems or mishaps. We should be willing to do that for them, because that's what He does with us:

*The LORD upholds all who are falling
and raises up all who are bowed down.*
Psalm 145:14 (ESV)

When disagreements arise over questions of doctrine or practice we also need to be very selective about the issues over which we ought to take a stand. We should not get into a conflict situation over every difference of opinion. Otherwise we could end up contending with others unnecessarily, when no vital issue of principle is at stake:

But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile.

Titus 3:9 (RSV)

*Do not contend with a man for no reason,
when he has done you no harm.*
Proverbs 3:30 (ESV)

Try to see other people as God sees them

A good technique, when irritated by people, and where we want to avoid the problem escalating or continuing, is to try to see people the way God sees them. God isn't irritated by people's accents, opinions or mannerisms or by their peculiar ways. He looks at people more deeply and sees the value and also the potential inside them.

In particular, He is keenly aware that that person, whom we may find irritating, is someone for whom Jesus died and who could be saved if they would just repent and turn to Him. Even between fellow Christians there can be, and frequently is, friction, and tension. This can spoil relationships, not only for the two people concerned, but for a whole church.

Apostle Paul came across this in the church in Philippi. Two good women, both of whom were devout and hard working for the church, just did not get along with each other. Paul urged them to 'agree' with each other and he asked the rest of the church to help them to do so:

²I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. ³Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life. ⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;
Philippians 4:2-5 (ESV)

We are never to take vengeance by or for ourselves - we are to leave that to God

Forgiving others, even at its narrowest definition, also means that we must not do anything to take vengeance. We must never seek to 'get even' with people, or to 'pay them back' for what they did to us. We are to "leave room for the wrath of God". That is we are to leave it to Him to punish people, which He certainly will do:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly.

1 Peter 2:23 (RSV)

not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.

1 Peter 3:9 (NASB)

¹⁷Never pay back evil for evil to anyone Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. ¹⁹Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰"but if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:17-21 (NASB)

When King David was a young man he spent a number of years on the run from King Saul, who was persecuting him unjustly and seeking to kill him. However, David refused to take matters into his own hands or to take vengeance. Instead he asked God to intervene and judge between himself and King Saul:

¹² May the Lord judge between me and you, may the Lord avenge me upon you; but my hand shall not be against you.

1 Samuel 24:12 (RSV)

Seeking vengeance would also amount to usurping Jesus' unique role as Judge. It would mean we were punishing people ourselves, instead of leaving them for Jesus to deal with. He wants us to leave it to Him to punish people, not to do it now, for ourselves:

*Do not say, "I will repay evil";
wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.
Proverbs 20:22 (ESV)*

*since indeed God deems it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you,
2 Thessalonians 1:6 (RSV)*

So, although *we* are not authorised to take vengeance, Jesus *is* authorised to do so, and He will, i.e. with all those who do not repent and do not believe in Him. We can be very sure of that. Moreover, there are circumstances in which it may even be appropriate for us to look forward with some sense of anticipation to the Day of Judgment, when Jesus will take that vengeance on our behalf. The taking of vengeance, so long as it is done only by Jesus, is a right and proper aspect of God's justice. Thus it is something good, for which we can give thanks, and even rejoice:

*¹⁰ The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance;
he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked.
¹¹ Men will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges on earth."
Psalm 58:10-11 (RSV)*

*⁸ Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together
⁹ before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.
Psalm 98:8-9 (RSV)*

For example, if a person's child has been murdered, then at the Day of Judgment, the murderer will be punished for it unless, of course, he has become a Christian in the meantime and been forgiven. However, if he has not repented and been forgiven by God, then it would not necessarily be wrong for the relatives of that victim to want God's Judgment to come, and even to take satisfaction, and achieve a sense of closure, from that Judgment when it takes place.

That is a valid way to think in relation to an unrepentant person. It is not necessarily inconsistent with having forgiven the other person, at least at the most basic level, i.e. having stepped aside and left it to Jesus to judge them. However, the position is different in relation to a wrongdoer who has, like us, repented and been saved. Such a man is forgiven, just as we are, and will not be punished. We shall examine this issue in some detail below.

If appropriate, Jesus will punish those who have harmed us. It is not necessarily wrong for us to take comfort from that fact.

When we forgive a wrongdoer it does not mean that he will never be judged. It is simply that they won't be judged *by us*. Jesus will actually judge unrepentant, unsaved people with a devastating severity, on a scale far greater than anything we could do to them:

*³⁵ 'Vengeance is Mine, and retribution,
In due time their foot will slip;
For the day of their calamity is near,
And the impending things are hastening upon them.'
³⁶ "For the LORD will vindicate His people,
And will have compassion on His servants,
When He sees that their strength is gone,
And there is none remaining, bond or free.
Deuteronomy 32:35-36 (NASB)*

*Say to those with anxious heart,
"Take courage, fear not.
Behold, your God will come with vengeance;
The recompense of God will come,
But He will save you."
Isaiah 35:4(NASB)*

⁵This is a plain indication of God's righteous judgment so that you will be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering. ⁶For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸dealing

out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, ¹⁰when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed--for our testimony to you was believed.

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 (NASB)

It is not necessarily inappropriate for a wronged party to take comfort from, and even look forward to, the fact that Jesus' judgment will come upon the wrongdoer. In part, it is the very fact that we know that that is going to happen which can make it possible for us to step back and to leave the judgment, and even the taking of vengeance, for Him to deal with instead of us.

Therefore we need not necessarily feel guilty or hypocritical about the fact that we want Jesus' judgment to come upon a person who has done something wrong. It does not necessarily mean that we are being unforgiving. In itself it is consistent with 'stepping aside' and letting Jesus be the one who judges.

However, what if the wrongdoer has repented and been saved and forgiven by God? In those circumstances it would no longer be right to desire that they be punished. In such a case, everything has changed. The wrongdoer, if he truly has been saved, has now had all his sins washed away. That includes his sins(s) against you.

Moreover, he now has all the righteousness of Jesus Christ, because it has been imputed or transferred to him, just as was done for you when you were saved and forgiven. We might object that it would be unfair for that wrongdoer to be 'let off' by Jesus. We might see it as an injustice and feel aggrieved that he is no longer going to get what he deserves.

In one sense that is an understandable emotion. However, we ought to think very carefully indeed before saying that we want everybody to get what they 'deserve'. If God did that, then He would also have to give *us* what *we* deserve, not just other people. But that would be a place in the Lake of Fire, not forgiveness and mercy.

The point is how can we say that God should forgive us for *our* sins, including what we did to harm person Y, but then demand that justice and vengeance be shown to person X for the harm *they* did to us? Surely it has to be either both, or neither, of us that can receive God's mercy? We can't say that it should be shown to us, but not to person X.

If we did claim to be entitled to insist on justice as against person X then what if person Y, whom we have wronged, was to demand, in like manner, that God punish us? That is the dilemma we face. If we want to receive forgiveness we must also be willing to give it.

Likewise, if we are going to demand justice and retribution for others then we would have to accept that those things should be dispensed to us as well, which would not be a good idea. It certainly wouldn't get my vote. If the wrongdoer meets God's conditions, as we did, and receives His forgiveness, we cannot any longer look for God to take vengeance upon him.

We have to accept the whole package, i.e. receiving forgiveness ourselves and also giving it to others. Otherwise, we have not really understood the Gospel. Let us now attempt to define forgiveness more fully and enlarge upon some of these other related concepts that have been mentioned.

A closer look at what forgiveness consists of

To forgive another person, *in the narrowest sense* of the word, requires us to recognise and accept the following things:

- a) that a wrong has been done to you and, perhaps, that harm has been caused.
- b) that it has been done by person X (or group X)
- c) that all wrongdoing will be fully dealt with by Jesus, either at the Judgment Seat of Christ (for Christians) or the Great White Throne Judgment (for non-Christians).
- d) that only Jesus is legitimately qualified for the role of judging person X or group X.
- e) that for you to attempt to judge and/or punish that person or group now would be premature, illegitimate and unauthorized. It would involve usurping Jesus' role.
- f) that due to your inadequate knowledge and understanding, person X would never get a 'fair trial' from you. You would never be able to take fully into account the multitude of relevant facts, his various motives, and any other aggravating or mitigating factors. You just don't have enough wisdom or computing capacity for a job like that. It would be worse than if you had just wandered into the Old Bailey, sat in a Judge's chair and started to try a case. Doing that would be unthinkable. None of us would even dream of it. Yet that is the equivalent of what we would be doing if we refused to forgive others and tried to judge them ourselves.
- g) that we have to make a decision to hand the case over to Jesus. We can, and must, step aside and leave it all to Him. He will then deal with everything in His own time, either now, or later, or both.

These points summarize the main things we need to do if we are to forgive someone effectively. But the above list sounds quite different from most people's idea of what forgiveness involves. Forgiveness is not a well understood concept, even amongst Christians. There is a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about it, due to poor teaching, or no teaching at all.

It is also caused by demonic deception which obscures the biblical understanding of forgiveness and promotes various other garbled definitions instead. The Devil does not want forgiveness to be properly understood or practiced. He tries particularly hard, therefore, to distort our understanding of this subject.