

CHAPTER 13

SOME COMMON ERRORS AND AREAS OF CONFUSION ABOUT WHAT FORGIVENESS IS, AND HOW AND WHY WE ARE TO DO IT

¹⁷ *“You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbor, lest you incur sin because of him. ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.*

Leviticus 19:17-18 (ESV)

¹⁰*If you forgive anyone, I also forgive him. And what I have forgiven--if there was anything to forgive--I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, ¹¹in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*

Corinthians 2:10-11 (NIV)

Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

Romans 12:17 (RSV)

Most people misunderstand what forgiveness is. They then reject it, or fail to achieve it, because their definition is wrong

Many of us have such an inaccurate understanding of forgiveness that we reject the very idea as being unrealistic. We can't accept the unbiblical concept that we mistakenly have in mind when the word 'forgiveness' is used. Therefore we don't even try to do it. Others do attempt it, even repeatedly, but because their definition of forgiveness is wrong, they don't succeed.

Therefore they become discouraged and give up. They may never realise that the things they were trying to do were not necessarily what God means by forgiveness. They could have succeeded, and still could succeed, if they only understood correctly what God actually wants them to do in their particular circumstances.

God is the most sensible, practical, reasonable and realistic person in the whole universe. Therefore, if the very idea of forgiveness seems to you to be absurdly idealistic, impractical, and even impossible, then that indicates that you have probably misunderstood what you are being commanded to do.

God would not command you to do something which is impossible. Neither would He say anything unrealistic or impractical. So, if we feel that He is being unrealistic, that should prompt us to look again at the definitions of the words we are dealing with.

Why is forgiveness preached on so rarely?

Probably the main reason why so few Christians understand forgiveness correctly is that there is so little teaching on it. It is either taught poorly by church leaders, who don't know what it really means, or it is not taught at all. The latter is the normal position. When did you ever hear a useful, practical and biblical sermon on *what* forgiveness is and *how* and *why* you should forgive others? I haven't heard one in the last 25 years at least. Indeed, I don't think I have ever heard one.

Why is that? Perhaps one reason is that forgiveness is difficult, even if correctly defined, and probably impossible if wrongly defined. Thus many preachers find, in their own personal experience, that forgiving others has not been a success. So, because few men want to discuss their own failures or difficulties, the whole subject is avoided.

Another probable reason is that the subject of forgiveness is a difficult one for church members to listen to. Thus, if a church leader is the kind of man who wants to be liked, as many are, then he will avoid teaching on any subject which is controversial, or makes people feel uncomfortable. He won't want to say anything which has the potential to remind them of their grievances and get them stirred up.

However, perhaps the main reason that forgiveness is not preached on is that many leaders just don't understand it themselves. That is probably because they too have not been properly taught about it. There are very few good books on the subject of forgiveness and preachers themselves have not heard any good biblical sermons on it, which they can copy or download.

What forgiveness does *not* mean, and does *not* involve:

Contrary to what millions of people assume, forgiveness does *not* mean, or involve, any of the following:

telling yourself that no real wrong was ever done to you by person X or that you are over-reacting, being over-sensitive or even imagining things

saying that person X was right to do what he did to you

excusing or covering up for person X

sympathizing with person X

telling yourself that it was all your own fault, not the wrongdoer's fault

being sappy and wet about what happened and making yourself into a 'doormat' to be walked on.

resuming or continuing a close relationship with the wrongdoer, as if nothing had ever happened

being able to make all the pain go away, such that you no longer feel upset or angry about it and have made yourself 'get over it'

forgetting the wrong done to you, how it made you feel, and the harm it did

believing that the wrongdoer should not have to be punished and should not be required to repay what he has taken, or pay compensation for the damage or injury caused

letting the wrongdoer 'get away with it', such that it would be considered wrong for you to go to the police or appoint a lawyer to sue them

being reconciled with the wrongdoer, such that you are on friendly terms with them, and would be happy to have them round to your house, go out for a drink, or even just engage in 'small talk' with them. In fact, forgiveness and reconciliation are totally separate and different concepts. The former does not require, or imply, the latter. Forgiveness is something you decide to do on your own. It does not require the wrongdoer's cooperation, apology or repentance or for him to reciprocate in any way. He need not necessarily even be aware that you have forgiven him. However, reconciliation has to be mutual. It can't happen unless the wrongdoer firstly acknowledges his fault, apologizes, repents and, above all, stops wronging you.

feeling able to trust the wrongdoer. Again, it is foolishness to think that forgiveness implies or requires that trust has to be resumed. Nevertheless, a lot of people do assume that, which is one reason why they wrongly conclude that it is impossible to forgive. Actually, the Bible never even tells us to trust people who haven't wronged us, let alone those who have. Accordingly, there is

no requirement to trust the wrongdoer in order to prove to God, or to others, that we have genuinely forgiven him. A wrongdoer has to earn your trust, over a period of time, just as anybody else does, even if they aren't a wrongdoer. Furthermore, it is perfectly reasonable that you wait two or three times longer to trust a wrongdoer than a stranger who has never yet wronged you. In short, they have no right to receive your trust, and you are not under any duty to trust them, or anybody else, for that matter.

Nevertheless, many people, even within the Church, assume that forgiveness does involve some or all of (a)-(m) above. But it doesn't, or at least it doesn't necessarily involve any of them. The word 'forgiveness' has had its meaning distorted, like the word 'gay'. We must therefore recapture and reinforce the correct meaning of the word, because if we don't, a great many people will continue to believe that forgiveness is impossible to achieve.

There are also other words which mean similar things as forgiveness. They may even include forgiveness as a component element within them. But they still have their own, separate and distinct definitions

As we saw, people often confuse words like *reconciliation* with forgiveness, as if they were the same thing. There are other words as well which have their own separate and distinct definitions. Yet they are frequently assumed to be the same as forgiveness, or at least to be required, or implied, by forgiveness. We shall look at a few more of these words and examine what they do actually mean and how they are different from forgiveness, even if they often go together with forgiveness, or follow on afterwards.

a) peace

It is by no means always necessary, in order to forgive a person, that you must also be at peace with them. Sometimes forgiveness will lead to peace, but sometimes it will not. The two things do not necessarily have to go together in order for forgiveness to be valid. Moreover, peace requires the voluntary cooperation of *both parties*, not just the one doing the forgiving. We actually need to look more closely at the word 'peace' and distinguish between two of its definitions, because it has more than one:

i) irene

This is a Greek word, from which we get the girls' name, and is the basis for what most of us think of, at least in the West, when we hear the word peace. It means the absence of hostility or conflict, such that we are not at war, or actively engaged in a dispute, or otherwise struggling, against some other person or group. It is possible to have genuinely forgiven a person and yet not be at peace with them, in the sense of *irene* peace. You might still need to be a witness against them in a criminal trial, or give evidence against them in a workplace disciplinary hearing.

Or you might feel it necessary to contact the local council to pursue a complaint against them because of their abusive behaviour, or for parking across your driveway, and so on. The list of possibilities is endless. Yet, each of these things, which clearly show that we are *not* at peace (*irene* peace) are entirely consistent with us having truly forgiven the other person. There is no contradiction or inconsistency, because forgiveness does not necessarily require that we be at peace (*irene*) with the other person. It may lead to *irene* peace, or it may not. They, or you, might be unwilling or unable to be at *irene* peace. Nevertheless, you can still validly forgive them.

ii) shalom

This is a Hebrew word which is also translated as 'peace' in English. However, it does not mean the same as the Greek word 'irene'. *Shalom* peace is much deeper and wider than the mere

absence of hostilities or conflict. Shalom means a complete wholesomeness, integrity, prosperity and sense of well-being at the deepest level. So, if a person does not forgive another person, and is holding a grudge and feeling vengeful, they will not have shalom peace within themselves.

However, a person may have genuinely forgiven the wrongdoer but still not be experiencing shalom peace (or not yet) because they are still grieving or feeling wounded, violated or traumatized. They may even feel righteous indignation or anger. Such feelings may be felt, such that there is no shalom type peace, but it does not necessarily mean that the injured party is disobeying Jesus' command to forgive.

He might well have obeyed that command, and genuinely handed the whole matter over to God and/or to the civil or criminal authorities. However, he is still reeling from the shock of what happened, trying to come to terms with it, and gradually getting his emotions back under control.

That process of re-establishing your equilibrium may well take a long time, but it does not necessarily indicate that there is a lack of forgiveness. Of course, it could be that there is unforgiveness, but we cannot just assume it. The issue of whether we have recovered our shalom-type peace is an entirely separate question from the question of whether we have genuinely forgiven the wrongdoer.

I emphasize this because some people have felt guilt, or have been put under pressure, or falsely accused of being unforgiving, simply because they have not yet recovered their composure and their shalom-type peace. Such accusations come from one or more of the following sources:

- other people who don't understand the true definition of forgiveness and wrongly assume that it requires us to be fully at peace etc. They might foolishly say that a person who has not yet calmed down and is "*still going on about what happened to them*" is a nuisance and is causing problems by being 'unforgiving'.
- ourselves, because we too misunderstand, or wrongly define, forgiveness. Therefore we may feel convinced that we have not achieved it, or never can achieve it, because we still feel some emotional turmoil.
- demons, who whisper lies into our minds and tell us that we are being unforgiving and are disobeying what Jesus said. They don't say that in order to induce you to become obedient to God's Word. They just want to increase your wretchedness and misery by making you feel guilt, shame and hopelessness. The truth is that you could actually achieve real forgiveness if you only knew its correct definition. Indeed, you may already have done so, but the demons have convinced you that you haven't.

b) mercy

The word *mercy* is obviously linked to forgiveness. However, it is not the same thing. Perhaps the simplest and best definition of mercy is that it is where person A (who is usually in a position of power, strength or authority) chooses not to do, or give, to person B what they deserve. The point, for our present purposes, is that even when we genuinely obey Jesus' command to forgive, it does not necessarily mean that we must *also* show mercy.

Mercy is a separate and additional step to take. It goes beyond forgiveness. So, person A might truly forgive person B by handing the matter over to God and/or leave it to the civil/criminal authorities to deal with, and he may seek no vengeance or retribution for himself. Yet, he might also, at the same time, choose not to show mercy.

For example, he would be doing nothing wrong if he chose to tell the Police that he wants person B to be prosecuted. Alternatively, person A might freely choose to say to the Police: "*Please don't press*

any charges against person B. I want to drop the matter and I don't want to see his life blighted by receiving a criminal record."

If person A said that, they would be showing mercy. Another word for that is *clemency*, although we mainly use that word in the context of a person who is in a position of authority and chooses not to exercise their power. Yet another word which we use for showing mercy is '*magnanimity*'. This is the kind of mercy that is shown by the victor to the loser in a war, or indeed by the victor, or stronger party, in any kind of dispute.

Therefore, at the end of World War Two, Churchill's advice to the Allies was that they should show magnanimity to the Germans, unlike what happened at the end of World War One. That war culminated in what most felt was a punitive, vengeful and even oppressive treaty. Magnanimity is what we can choose to show when we have been wronged, but now have the upper hand, and the wrongdoer lies prostrate at our feet.

In those circumstances, to choose not to seek for justice, but instead to stay one's hand and demand less than one is entitled to, is magnanimous. Magnanimity goes beyond forgiveness. Therefore a person can truly forgive, at least in the basic, narrow sense, without also choosing to be magnanimous in the way that they handle their victory.

It may, or may not, be right to show mercy, in any of its various forms, but the point is that it is something different from, and *additional to*, forgiveness. In other words, person A may have genuinely forgiven person B for the assault or theft or whatever, but still feel that it is necessary and appropriate for justice to take its course. Therefore they choose to go to the police rather than show mercy by not going to them.

Remember the crucial point about what forgiveness is at its most basic level. It primarily means handing the case over so that someone else can be the judge and carry out any sentence. One can do that completely sincerely without also being under a duty to refrain from helping the prosecution, or civil action, or workplace disciplinary action, which then follows.

If forgiveness involves handing the case over, which it does, then how can anybody say that in order to truly forgive we must choose not even to hand it over, but rather that we should feel obligated to drop the matter entirely? That would be to extend the meaning of forgiveness illegitimately and to turn it into something much bigger and wider than what the Bible means by the word.

Therefore, if person A merely hands the case over to the Police (and/or to God) and seeks no personal vengeance, then he has already fulfilled the basic meaning of forgiveness. God might, or might not, want person A to go even further and to show mercy *as well*. However, if that is what God wants, then God would be asking person A to *show mercy*, not to forgive, because he has already done that.

God does not get confused about the words He uses. Neither does He say one thing when He means another. Therefore, forgiveness means forgiveness. Mercy means mercy. Peace means peace and so on. They are all distinct words in their own right, with their own definitions, and are not interchangeable synonyms. To do one of them does not necessarily require us to do any or all of the others as well.

c) grace/graciousness

We saw that mercy is "*not* giving people what they *do* deserve". Grace is the other side of the same coin. It basically means "giving people what they *don't* deserve". Therefore, extending the points made above, we can imagine various factual situations where it would be right, and indeed essential, to forgive, but not necessarily appropriate to show grace.

So, if a person has wronged us, and we have genuinely forgiven them, God might, or might not, want us to go further and show grace to them. Or, God might want us to show grace in a particular way, but not necessarily in some other way. Alternatively, God might want us to show grace up to a certain point, but not beyond that point.

Therefore, if we choose not to help a person who has wronged us, or choose not to give them a favour, or privilege or gift, it would not necessarily mean that we have not genuinely forgiven them. Showing such grace towards them might, or might not, be wise or appropriate. That is it may, or may not, be God's will in those circumstances.

You cannot make a general rule. Even less can you equate forgiveness with grace and therefore accuse another person, or even yourself, of being unforgiving, merely for choosing not to go beyond forgiveness and show grace to a particular person in a particular situation. It does not necessarily follow.

However, what if a person was so full of bitterness and the desire for vengeance that they were reveling in their decision to withhold grace from the wrongdoer and taking pleasure from withholding it? If so, then their heart-attitude would obviously be wrong. It might even indicate that they had not truly forgiven the wrongdoer. Nevertheless, the point is that the giving, or withholding, of grace is a completely separate, stand-alone issue. Like mercy, it goes beyond the duty to forgive and is distinct from it.

d) forgetting

By this I mean forgetting the wrong done to you, no longer feeling upset, and ceasing to think about the person who did the harm. 'Forgetting' is another much misunderstood word, which is frequently confused with forgiving. Therefore, if person A can't, or can't yet, forget what was done to him by person B, or the feelings it produced, it does not necessarily mean that he has not genuinely forgiven person B.

The command to forgive others does not extend to also forgetting what they did or how it made you feel. If Jesus had wanted to command that we forget all about the offence as well, then He would have said so, but He did not. One reason why God did not command us to forget all about the wrongs done to us, or to forget the way we felt as a result, is because He knows that we often aren't capable of doing that. God can choose to forget, but we can't necessarily manage to do that.

At any rate, we can't do it purely as an exercise of our will. We sometimes need time for our feelings to heal and become less raw. That is very significant, because God never gives us any command *to* feel, or not feel, a particular *emotion*. He only gives commands in connection with the exercise of our *will*. It is always expressed in terms of what we should say or do, not how we should feel in our emotions.

You might respond to that by saying that He commands us not to be angry. However, when He makes that command, what God means is that we are not to *speak* or *act*, or *react*, towards other people with sinful, fleshly, unrighteous anger. Those are all things we can control and decide to do or not to do. He is referring to circumstances where the expression of anger would be carnal, and thus sinful. He is not referring to godly anger, or righteous indignation, such as Jesus demonstrated when He expelled the money changers from the Temple.

At any rate, the point is that all of God's commandments have to do with what we say, do and even think, as an exercise of our will. We are accountable for what we choose to do or say, but not necessarily for how we feel. Accordingly, we are never commanded not to feel grief, sadness, hurt or shock or not to feel that we have been violated. There is no sin in feeling any of those things.

Therefore our inability to forget the wrong done to us, or to alter our feelings, is not disobedience. It is not, in itself, even evidence, let alone proof, that we have not genuinely forgiven someone. That said, what if the real reason why we are failing to forget a wrong done to us, or to stop feeling as we do, is because we are deliberately, and repeatedly, choosing to remind ourselves of it?

We may even be reminding the wrongdoer of it, because we get pleasure from bringing it up in conversation and from making the other person feel guilty about it. Then, that would be a sign that we have not genuinely forgiven the person. As with everything else, we have to approach this difficult subject with balance. We also need to have regard to our real motives, which may not necessarily be what we say they are.

e) trusting the wrongdoer

It may, or may not, be appropriate to *trust* a person who has previously wronged you. It depends entirely on the circumstances and on the role, responsibility or property which you are considering entrusting or re-entrusting to them. It could be very unwise, or even dangerous, to trust them again.

It may also be impossible, or a breach of your professional duty to do so, because you have to bear in mind the needs of others who might be adversely affected if the wrongdoer was to act wrongly, or let you down, again. The point is that whether it is right or wrong to trust the person again is an entirely separate issue from the duty to forgive him.

It is perfectly valid to forgive and yet still not feel able to trust the person. Or, you might feel that it is possible, and appropriate, to do both. However, if that is the case, you are going beyond forgiving them and are adding a further dimension.

f) giving the wrongdoer another chance

This is linked to the issue of whether or not we feel able to trust the wrongdoer again. However, it is also a separate point in itself. It is possible to give a person another chance, even if we don't yet trust them, and even if we actually expect them to let us down again. The point is that the issue of whether or not to give them another chance goes beyond forgiveness.

So we can genuinely forgive a person and yet not feel that it would be wise or safe to give them another chance. It is a matter of individual judgment, such that another Christian might be willing to give them another chance, whereas you are not. Yet, you could both be right.

A classic example of this is the crisis that arose in the Book of Acts when John Mark (better known to us as Mark, the writer of the second gospel) deserted apostle Paul and let him down when under pressure. Later on, Mark evidently said that he had repented and wanted to rejoin the team, but that led to an argument.

Paul's personal stance was that he was not willing to give Mark another chance. However, Paul's partner, Barnabas, felt that Mark should be allowed to have another go and to work with them again. They could not agree on this, so Paul and Barnabas split up and went their separate ways. Barnabas therefore took Mark with him and Paul took Silas:

³⁶ *And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Come, let us return and visit the brethren in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."* ³⁷ *And Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark.* ³⁸ *But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphyl'ia, and had not gone with them to the work.* ³⁹ *And there arose a sharp contention, so that they separated from each other; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus,* ⁴⁰ *but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of the Lord.* ⁴¹ *And he went through Syria and Cili'cia, strengthening the churches.*

Acts 15:36-41 (RSV)

That episode had a happy ending. Mark genuinely changed and turned into a mature, reliable worker. Indeed, in the end, God honoured him by allowing him to write the second gospel, for which he got the material from apostle Peter, with whom he became very close:

*She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings; and so does my son Mark.
1 Peter 5:13 (RSV)*

More to the point, Mark was eventually accepted, trusted and welcomed back by Paul to work alongside him:

*Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, and Mark the cousin of Barnabas (concerning whom you have received instructions—if he comes to you, receive him),
Colossians 4:10 (RSV)*

Mark's dramatic and total rehabilitation is an encouragement to us all to believe that even where people fail badly, or behave badly, there is always the chance to repent and change and eventually become a success. The question is who was right, Paul or Barnabas? The short answer is probably that they both were. At any rate, Paul did not act wrongly by refusing to let Mark rejoin the team. He clearly felt it would be unwise and even unsafe.

In making that decision, Paul was not failing to forgive Mark, or acting in a way that was inconsistent with genuine forgiveness. It was up to Paul to decide what was best and whether or not it would be wise to go beyond forgiving Mark, by choosing to give him another chance. Barnabas saw it differently and was willing to take the risk. That was his personal choice. Happily, it turned out to have been an inspired one.

That said, it may well have had more to do with the simple fact that Mark was a cousin of Barnabas and therefore he possibly chose to give him more leeway than he would have given to a non-relative. The point is that in choosing not to go as far as Barnabas was willing to go, Paul was not sinning. In particular, he was not failing to forgive.

g) being reconciled with the wrongdoer and starting or resuming a friendship with him

You will see the pattern by now and realise that this is going even further than trusting the wrongdoer and/or giving him another chance. To be *reconciled* may mean that we are resuming a full personal relationship involving trust, friendship, closeness and even intimacy and the sharing of confidences. Clearly, that goes way beyond merely forgiving the person. Therefore, whether to be reconciled is an even bigger decision.

The point, for our purposes, is that we have absolutely no duty to be reconciled to every wrongdoer. Reconciliation is not required in order for us to be able to say that we have genuinely forgiven them. I emphasize that because this issue has caused a great deal of confusion and stress for people who are trying hard to forgive a wrongdoer.

They may mistakenly assume that unless they are willing to be fully reconciled, and feel entirely comfortable about resuming a close personal relationship, then they have not genuinely forgiven the person and are even being disobedient to Jesus' command to forgive.

That is plainly wrong and is a particularly unhelpful thing to say to a person who is struggling to deal with a wrong done to them. Reconciliation may, or may not, be achieved at some later point. It depends on a host of circumstances, in particular the *attitude* and subsequent *conduct* of the wrongdoer and whether he has genuinely repented, apologized and changed.

If he hasn't done all of those things, then there would be no valid or meaningful basis for reconciliation. It could even be foolish to attempt it. So, as with all the other words, we need to see

reconciliation as another separate, stand-alone issue, over and above forgiveness. It may or may not be appropriate, or possible, even in the long term.

An example illustrating basic forgiveness, but then adding further elements on top of that

It may assist our understanding of how forgiveness works in its narrower and broader senses, to present a simple illustration. Imagine that you have loaned your lawnmower to your next door neighbor. However, you then discover that he has misused it, either carelessly or deliberately, and caused serious damage to it, rendering it useless.

Perhaps it has cost you £200 and he is not sorry for what he did, or bothered about how you feel. Moreover, he is refusing to repay you for the lawnmower, even though he is well able to do so. Let's examine that scenario and see how you might forgive that person and what else you might, or might not, also do, over and above forgiving him.

I have deliberately kept the example mundane and homely because, for most of us, the things we have to forgive are not spectacular things like murders or armed robberies. They are usually smaller injuries, offences and rudenesses which occur in ordinary, day to day life. To begin with, we can say for sure that you have a clear duty to forgive your neighbour *in the basic, narrow sense*.

That is you would have to step aside, recuse yourself and leave it to Jesus to judge him for what he has done to your lawnmower and his subsequent refusal to repay you, or even to apologise. That is always your duty and you are expressly commanded to do that.

However, it might, or might not, be possible, or even appropriate, for you to go further than that and do any or all of the other things which we have looked at, each of which go beyond basic forgiveness. So, it may be that God *also* wants you to do some or all of these things. Alternatively, He might not.

What is more, even if He does want you to do them, it may be that He only wants you to do so up to a certain point, rather than to the fullest extent possible. Let's therefore look at each of these possible extra steps that you could take:

a) to be at *peace* with your neighbour in the sense of not being angry with him, or in terms of not going to see a lawyer and suing him for the damage he did. Alternatively, you could actually choose to sue him and yet still have genuinely forgiven him, in the narrow sense of handing the judgment over to Jesus and, in the meantime, to the civil courts which God has put in place. You can do that provided you are not seeking to exact any vengeance of your own, and are refusing to allow yourself to hold a grudge or nurse any bitterness or hatred towards him.

b) to show *mercy* towards him by not requiring him to get what he deserves, for example by choosing not to make him pay for the damage. You might, or might not, choose to show such mercy to him, depending on the circumstances. Conversely, you might choose not to be merciful, and to insist, instead, on obtaining redress. That decision would not necessarily be inconsistent with forgiving him, in the narrow sense. In other words, if you choose to show mercy by letting him off, it would be something you were doing in addition to forgiving him, rather than being an integral part of the act of forgiveness in itself.

c) to show *grace* towards him by causing or permitting him to receive some benefit or privilege which he does not deserve. You might do that, for example, by allowing him to continue to borrow your new lawnmower, despite what he did to the previous one. You would be under no duty to show such grace towards him. It goes beyond basic forgiveness and it may, or may not, be wise. It would depend on all sorts of other factors such as the attitude he shows, whether he later apologizes, and what his circumstances are. It could even be that God wants you to give him an unusually large amount of leeway, because He wants you to try to build a relationship with that man so that you can

perhaps reach him, or his family, with the Gospel. So, God might, or might not, want you to let him use your new lawnmower in future. But, either way, He will always want you to forgive him, i.e. in the narrow sense.

d) to *forget* the wrong done to you. Again, this is not required for genuine forgiveness, i.e. in the basic, narrow sense. It is a quite separate matter, which goes well beyond basic forgiveness. It may, or may not, be wise, or even possible, for you to forget what he did. There could be circumstances, for example if the damage was purely accidental, where you might feel it right, and feel able, to put the harm done to you entirely out of your mind. Then you could forget all about it, and treat your neighbor as if nothing had ever happened. Or, the circumstances could be such that you would not feel that that was appropriate, or even possible. For example, he might have done the damage recklessly, or even spitefully, and he could be wholly unrepentant. He could even be mocking you and laughing about what he did. It entirely depends. So, not forgetting the wrong done to you does not mean that you have not genuinely forgiven him. Likewise, if you do manage to forget it, you have gone a long way beyond what is required of you for basic forgiveness.

e) to *trust* him, either with your tools, or in some other way. Forgiving your neighbor does not oblige you to trust him, either now or in the future. Indeed, it might be very unwise, or even downright foolish, to trust him. He could be entirely unworthy of any trust, either in that area, or any other. God would, very probably, not want you to trust him, because the Bible does not tell us to trust others. On the contrary, the usual default-setting is that we should be cautious. Even so, He still commands you to forgive him, at least in the basic sense, but the resumption of trust is not required in order for genuine forgiveness to occur.

f) to be *reconciled* with him, such that you are back on friendly terms and in a full relationship, as if nothing had ever happened. Again, this may or may not be either appropriate or possible. As we have seen above, it depends on all sorts of other factors. What we can say for sure is that the issue of whether you have, or have not, become reconciled has nothing to do with whether you have genuinely forgiven him in the basic, narrow sense of the word.

One reason why forgiveness is so badly misunderstood is that demons work hard to make sure that we misunderstand it. Their focus on this area shows how important it is.

As you consider the issue now, does it occur to you that it is odd that we are so prone to misunderstanding words like forgiveness, but understand other words very easily? For example, have you ever met anybody who does not understand words like ‘refrigerator’ or ‘temperature’ or even more complex words like ‘democracy’ or ‘unemployment’?

In fact, I would go so far as to predict that if a survey was carried out, it would reveal that even the offside rule in football (soccer) is more widely and accurately understood than the meaning of the word ‘forgiveness’. I would suggest that one explanation for this widespread lack of understanding is that the demons work hard to ensure that there is confusion about any word or concept which really matters.

They know which things would cause the biggest problems for the Church if they are not understood correctly. The demons don’t mind at all if you accurately understand refrigerators, the offside rule, and even democracy. So, they don’t bother to cause any sabotage in those areas. However, the demons know the huge significance of forgiveness.

It not only affects your relationships with other people, especially within the Church. It also has a major bearing on your effectiveness as a Christian, right across the board. It also affects the ability of the wider Church to function properly and to be a witness to the unsaved world around us. Most importantly of all, it even has a bearing on God’s willingness to forgive you.

It would therefore be hard to think of many things which could be more important than forgiving other people. The demons can't stop you from reading the Bible or from seeing that the forgiving of others is required of you. However, what they can very easily do is to render your efforts to forgive others ineffective by getting you *to define* forgiveness differently from how God defines it.

In particular, they want you to see it as being something bigger, wider and more difficult than it really is. If they can achieve that, then the chances are that you will:

- a) consider it impossible to forgive others
- b) therefore not even attempt it
- c) attempt it but fail, or at least believe you have failed, because you are trying to go further than God actually commands, and to do things which are over and above what He asks of us
- d) see forgiveness as something which has to be achieved at the level of your feelings when God sees it as taking place at the level of your will, i.e. a pure decision, or choice
- e) conclude that your attempts to forgive are not working and therefore give up on it and lapse back into unforgiveness, bitterness, and even hate
- f) avoid preaching to others on the subject of forgiveness, because you are discouraged and confused about it yourself, and find it hard to put into practice. That reluctance to teach others about the subject then compounds the problem of ignorance and confusion even further

As stated earlier, we don't seem to have any equivalent difficulty understanding other words that are in common usage, or even the less common words. We don't add extra layers of complexity to the meaning of those words, or mix them up with other things. Therefore, the fact that forgiveness is so widely and seriously misunderstood, and that our efforts to implement it are so profoundly ineffectual, shows how much effort the demons are putting in to sabotaging our thinking.

That in itself should help to persuade you that forgiveness is an exceptionally important issue and one which warrants a great deal of extra attention. The demons consider the derailing of our attempts to forgive each other to be of vital strategic importance to their war aims. Therefore, understanding it correctly, and achieving it in practice, must be equally important to ours. Accordingly, we should make at least the same effort to define its meaning correctly as the demons make in trying to obscure it.

Why does God make our forgiving others a pre-condition to Him forgiving us?

I believe that God has two main reasons for requiring us to forgive others, i.e. at least in the narrow, basic sense, before He will forgive us. They are as follows:

- a) For us to judge and punish people ourselves is to usurp the role of Jesus, which is presumptuous. If you think God is being overly sensitive about that, just imagine the reaction you would get from one of the judges at The Royal Courts of Justice on the Strand if you went into his court room and sat down in his chair. Would you accuse him of being over-sensitive if he sent for the ushers and had you thrown out?
- b) If we won't forgive others and insist instead on judging them, and even punishing and taking vengeance against them, ourselves, then it shows that we haven't properly grasped the fact that we too are sinful. We are each guilty of the same, or similar, things as that wrongdoer whom we are refusing to forgive. If we won't, or can't, see that then it may mean that our own repentance is insincere or inadequate. How can we, in our own sinful state as wrongdoers, cry out to God for

mercy and forgiveness if we haven't understood that the person who has wronged us is in an identical situation to our own?

At the very least, an unwillingness to forgive others may be evidence that you have not genuinely grasped the extent of your own sinfulness and your own need for repentance. Conversely, a genuine willingness to forgive others is powerful evidence that you have. Therefore, the fact that you have an ongoing attitude of unforgiveness and bitterness towards others calls into question the adequacy, and even the genuineness, of your own faith and repentance.

God is looking for truth and sincerity. Therefore it follows that this test of our genuineness, i.e. the question of whether we are willing to forgive others, will be very significant to Him. Accordingly, let's make sure we pass this test. Let's forgive others, at least in the basic, narrow sense. Ideally, let's try to go farther than that, if we can, and if it is appropriate. Then, without any hypocrisy, we can ask God to do the same for us.

The harm that unforgiveness and bitterness can do

There are many harmful consequences that follow if we will not forgive others. One major problem is the ongoing emotional effect that it has on us. If the many wrongs done to us are not forgiven and handed over to Jesus to judge (and punish if need be) then they won't go away. Instead, they will fester within us and grow into a 'tumour' of bitterness.

That build-up of unresolved grievances will have a very damaging effect on us. We know that from our own experience. There is even a nasty chemical reaction within us when we feel pent up anger which is not properly dealt with and has no outlet. When that reservoir of accumulated grievances isn't dealt with it turns into bitterness. That then flares up into fresh anger (i.e. of the carnal variety, not righteous anger) every time we remember what was done to us.

Sometimes we remind ourselves of the grievance by 'nursing' it and forming a grudge. We get the sense of grievance out, from time to time, to dwell on it and think about it again and again. Every time we do that we cause another dose of damaging chemicals and hormones to be produced within ourselves. These then linger in our system, doing physical harm to us, as well as emotional and spiritual damage.

In fact, these chemical responses are the cause of many literal cancers. I was speaking to a throat and mouth cancer specialist some time ago. She sees a regular pattern among her patients. Many of them are heavy-drinking men who are also embittered and angry, and have been so for years. Cancer appears to be one of the end results of all that.

I recall a very unfortunate woman whose son was brutally murdered in the 1960s by the 'Moors Murderers', Ian Brady and Myra Hindley. For decades the mother held on to all of her bitterness and campaigned for the murderers never to be released from prison. She would often appear on TV saying "*I will never forgive them for what they did*".

One really can understand her reaction and sympathize deeply with her. Who wouldn't? Her 12 year old son had been tortured and killed by two sadistic people who had done it all purely for 'fun' and showed no remorse. Yet, despite the appalling injustice of it all, the undeniable fact is that she caused severe additional damage to herself by holding on to all the bitterness, instead of handing it all over to Jesus.

One could see in her face, and hear in her voice, what her unforgiveness was doing to her. She eventually died, never having managed to forgive the killers, and never having got free of her own bitterness. The final 40 years of her life were blighted by it. By contrast, another man had a daughter who was killed by an IRA bomb at Enniskillen.

He decided, to forgive the men who did it. He was a mature Christian and had an accurate understanding of what forgiveness really is. His life from then on was totally different to that of the mother of the Moors murderers' victim. He still had to bear all his grief, but he was capable of carrying on living his life.

So, he still suffered all the sadness and loss, but the point is that those things did not destroy him, because he refused to let them do so. The same effect is seen, in either direction, in our own lives. We can choose to allow the bitterness to remain. If so, we will be harmed by it. Or, we can let it go, hand it over to Jesus (i.e. forgive the person in the narrow, basic sense) and have peace of mind.

Bitterness, rage and hate will also create major obstacles to your own progress, i.e. spiritually and otherwise. You will not be able to grow as a Christian, or serve God as you should, if you are harbouring such feelings. They prevent us from being of any use to God and create boundaries, beyond which we cannot go until we deal with them.

However, that can only be done by forgiving. There is no other way. There is no form of counselling or psychological technique or medication which can achieve what real forgiveness achieves. If we refuse to forgive the wrongdoer, the initial wrong done to us can end up having an exponentially increased impact upon the whole of the rest of our lives, even in eternity.

It seems unfair, in a sense, but that is the way it is and we have no alternative but to face that fact. A wise person will therefore do whatever is needed to remove from his life anything which hinders his own spiritual progress, regardless of whether it seems 'fair' to him. In particular, we need to prevent any "root of bitterness" from developing:

See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" spring up and cause trouble, and by it the many become defiled;

Hebrews 12:15 (RSV)

Unforgiveness makes us hard and sour. It also causes us to lose our sense of proportion and perspective. If so, we may become unjust to others, as the indirect, but foreseeable, result of the original wrong done to us. We are not to blame for that original wrong, but we are answerable for our reactions to it.

Thus a wrong can be endlessly multiplied in its effect, i.e. in the harm it causes, if we fail to forgive. Conversely, forgiveness, especially if it is done early, puts a stop to that chain of causation. It prevents the escalation of harm that would otherwise have resulted.

What is the difference between 'anger' and 'rage'?

We have seen above how so many important biblical words and concepts are seriously misunderstood. We shall now look at two more, i.e. 'anger' and 'rage'. The first, anger, is not necessarily sinful. Indeed, it can be entirely justified and even righteous, depending on the circumstances and the way in which the anger is handled and expressed:

²⁶Be angry, and yet do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷and do not give the devil an opportunity.

Ephesians 4:26-27 (NASB)

The classic example in the Scriptures of righteous anger, or righteous indignation, is the occasion when Jesus drove the corrupt and irreverent money changers out of the Temple:

And they came to Jerusalem. And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold and those who bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats

of those who sold pigeons; ¹⁶ and he would not allow anyone to carry anything through the temple. ¹⁷ And he taught, and said to them, “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers.” ¹⁸ And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching.

Mark 11:15-18 (RSV)

What Jesus did on that occasion was obviously not sinful. That has to be the case, because He never sinned in any way at all. The anger He showed was righteous. Those men were dishonouring God. Moreover, they were doing so in the Temple, of which Jesus was the rightful Lord. So, He had every right to throw them out and He was not over-stepping the mark or exceeding His proper authority.

Moreover, the way in which He manifested His anger was equally righteous. That is He never lost His self-control. Everything He did to the money changers was what He intended to do. That is He did not “lose His temper” or “go too far” or “lash out” or say things which he later regretted.

That is the essential difference between anger and rage. Anger is an emotion which is potentially righteous. It is capable of being felt by our ‘new man’ or ‘spirit’ or ‘new nature’. (See Book Seven for a fuller explanation of these terms.) Our new man or human spirit, which is what we are meant to operate in, and through, is capable of feeling anger and of expressing it and acting upon it.

So, whilst ever we continue to operate solely in or through our new man/spirit we will do all of this in a righteous, godly, sinless manner. That’s because our new man, i.e. our human spirit which is brought back to life when we are born again, is capable of feeling anger, but is incapable of sin.

However, if we are, instead, operating in, or through, our ‘old man’ or ‘flesh’ or ‘sinful nature’ or ‘Adamic nature’ (see Book Seven) then we will act sinfully and express or manifest our anger in a sinful or ‘carnal’ way. A person who is acting in that way will do the following kinds of things:

- a) raise their voice, or even shout
- b) lose their temper, i.e. lose their self-control
- c) lash out in words, or even physically
- d) say hurtful, wounding, insulting things which they may well regret later
- e) seek to get even with, or hit back at, the other person, i.e. as opposed to dealing firmly, but calmly, with the situation and simply doing what is appropriate and necessary, but no more

Perhaps it will assist if we look at some practical examples from my own past experience. If you are a police officer, as I was, and are dealing with an offender who has done something very wrong, you might feel a sense of anger at their conduct and its consequences. However, you must never allow that to affect the way you do your job. You must remain calm, measured and professional and not allow your interrogation of that prisoner to become intemperate.

Neither can you ever let your judgment become clouded by your feelings. Likewise, if you are a manager or proprietor dealing with a particularly nasty episode of misconduct, bullying or theft on the part of an employee, you could feel anger (in your spirit) but you must conduct the investigation and/or disciplinary hearing(s) with complete self-control at all times.

I am not discussing hypothetical or theoretical situations here. I have had to do both of the above things on many occasions. I am not saying that I always achieved it, but what I was aiming for was to do my job, get to the truth, and then take whatever action was justified by the facts. That could

include prosecuting an offender, or sacking an employee, or perhaps giving a lesser sanction such as a warning, or suspending the person, pending further enquiries etc.

In such situations it is absolutely essential that you maintain complete self-control throughout. I actually found that it helped if I deliberately lowered my voice and spoke more quietly and slowly than I would usually do. Then, if you decide to charge the person and recommend prosecution, or if you decide to sack them, you are making those decisions while acting in, or through, your spirit, with the help of the Holy Spirit, rather than through your old man or flesh.

The same considerations apply in all sorts of other situations, not just the ones described above. So, for example, you might need to take a faulty item back to a shop, or speak to a motorist who parks across your driveway, blocking your access. If so, your duty is to handle that situation with self-control, in and through your spirit, not your flesh.

You must also avoid any intemperate speech or conduct. Accordingly, we can, and sometimes must, handle situations which require us to make decisions about another person, or to confront them about their behaviour, but at the same time we can and must also:

- a) forgive them, in the narrow sense of not purporting to take Jesus' proper place as their ultimate Judge
- b) where appropriate, show mercy and grace to them, to the extent that it is right to do so
- c) possibly even go further than that and seek to make peace with them, be reconciled, resume trust and friendship etc, where those things are feasible and appropriate
- d) conduct ourselves temperately and with self-control, recognizing our own feelings, and even feeling anger where that is legitimate, but without any form of rage, railing or lashing out

Illegitimately judging other people brings God's judgment upon ourselves.

There is another good reason to forgive others. It is that when we judge other people (in the wrong sense of that word) we bring God's judgment upon ourselves. Moreover, He has said that He will use the same standards, or criteria, to judge us as we have used to judge others. So, if we are merciful and forgiving with others, then God will be merciful and forgiving with us. But if we are harsh, strict and unyielding, then He will be like that with us:

¹"Do not judge so that you will not be judged. ²"For in the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you.

Matthew 7:1-2 (NASB)

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

Matthew 5:7 (RSV)

What if the wrongdoer is unrepentant and unconcerned?

For many of us, this is the hardest thing to bear - seeing the wrongdoer walking around, carefree and not even showing any concern, let alone repentance, for what He has done. He may even taunt us about it and laugh about the harm he did to us. That is much harder to handle than when the wrongdoer recognises the wrong he did and is sorry for it.

In addition to the original wrong done to you, there is the fresh insult every day of seeing the wrongdoer's brazen face, knowing that he feels no remorse and that he seems to have got away with it, i.e. that there is no justice, or at least not at present.

Perhaps the police are refusing to deal with it. Or, the people around you, even in the church, may seem not to care about the wrong done to you. They may even be more sympathetic towards the wrongdoer than they are to you, as the victim. That is often the case. In these circumstance it is as if a fresh wound is created, or at least opened up, every day.

So, in addition to forgiving the original wrong, we also have to keep forgiving each fresh violation, day by day. That is very hard, but it is still possible, because what you are being commanded to do is actually quite narrow and is entirely a matter of your will, which is always under your control. It is not about your feelings or emotions, which you are not necessarily able to control.

Remember that what we are commanded to do is basic forgiveness, i.e. narrowly defined. Therefore it does not necessarily involve going any further than simply stepping aside, 'recusing yourself', and leaving everything, including any new offences caused by the wrongdoer's lack of remorse, to be judged by Jesus. It does not necessarily mean doing anything beyond that, or at least not to begin with. More could be required of us later.

So, whatever state our emotions might currently be in, we can always choose, purely as an exercise of our will, to step aside and leave the judging for Jesus to deal with. That basic act of forgiveness is all we are being required to do, until or unless God asks us to go further than that. Moreover, we are always capable of it. We just don't always choose to do it.

Dealing practically with the fresh violation you feel when you see that the wrongdoer is brass-faced and feels no shame

The same principles apply as with the original wrongdoing. So, along with the difficulties that come from the original wrong, you have the extra ordeal of facing the wrongdoer and seeing him, large as life. Perhaps he is even attending the same church as you, despite showing no apparent repentance. It may be that nobody thinks it matters, or is willing to confront him about it on your behalf.

Jesus is still the one who will judge these additional, ongoing offences. It is all going to be dealt with by Him, just as the original wrong will be. We can still step aside and leave each new violation to Him, in just the same way. We can hand it over to Jesus each day, tell Him how we feel, ask Him to deal with it and then go on to forgive the wrongdoer as a decision of our will.

If need be, we can do this over and over again, as many times as it takes, even "*seventy times seven*", as Jesus said. That said, we also need to be realistic. So, if the wrongdoer's brass-faced attitude is offending you, why not consider altering your daily routines, or travel times, or the place where you sit, so as to avoid coming into any further contact with him, or at least minimizing the contact?

There is no reason why you shouldn't do that. It is not inconsistent with genuinely forgiving, and it may well be a big help. However, if the avoidance of further contact isn't possible, for practical reasons, we just need to keep on forgiving. We should also ask God to help us to do so, and also to help us at an emotional level to deal with our feelings, even though those are not directly involved in the decision to forgive.

Those feelings may not be what forgiveness is about, but they still matter to us, and they also matter to God. He created us with emotions and it is possible for us to have feelings, even very strong ones, without degenerating into unforgiveness, or into any other form of sin, as a result.

Forgiveness is not done for the benefit of the wrongdoer. Therefore, it does not require their repentance before we can forgive them (though it does help a lot)

We must remember this crucial point, which may help some people who are struggling to forgive. It is that we do not forgive people for *their* sake, so that they can benefit. It is done, primarily, for *our own* benefit. So, it is not something we are doing to help the wrongdoer.

Furthermore, it does not require his repentance as a precondition. It is done to help ourselves and also, above all, to obey God. The wrongdoer may also benefit indirectly from our forgiveness, provided he repents and is willing to receive forgiveness from you and from God.

However, other than that, he will not usually benefit. In any case, even if he does benefit, he is not to be seen as the focal point of the situation, either from your perspective or God's. It is not about the wrongdoer and it is not being done for his sake. On the contrary, his indifference to our forgiveness, and to any mercy or grace that we show to him, will probably only make his own eventual judgment a stricter one.

So, when we struggle to forgive, we need to keep reminding ourselves that it is something we are trying to do for our own benefit. It is for the sake of our own health, both emotional and physical, and also to protect ourselves spiritually. Above all, though, it is an issue of obedience.

Don't allow the wrongdoer to harm you even further by preventing you from forgiving

Given all these factors, and there are some more that we shall look at below, we must not allow the wrongdoer's unrepentant attitude to prevent us from achieving forgiveness. That would be to allow the wrongdoer to compound the original wrong which he did. So, do not allow anybody to have so much influence over you that they can determine whether, or when, you forgive them. It is not up to them.

It is up to you, because your forgiveness of them is primarily being done for your benefit, not theirs. And, of course, it is being done in order to obey God's command. Therefore you must not allow anybody else to be in control of whether or not you obey God. So, be in sole control of your own life. Don't allow the wrongdoer to retain any ongoing power or influence over you, either in this area, or in any other. Of course, this is much easier said than done, but it still remains the right thing to aim for.