

What is Biblical Forgiveness?

Tim Conway | illbehonest.com

Okay, you can turn in your Bibles with me this morning to Ephesians 4. I'm not skipping the rest of 3. This is actually not part of the Ephesians series. This is one more topical message. I think next Sunday, Lord willing, we will resume Ephesians 3.

Let's pray. Oh Father, I feel weak. These songs have expressed it - our weakness. Where else would we go, Lord, but to You? We know that it is the very characteristic of the wicked that they don't call upon You. But Lord, we call upon You. We need You. Lord, we don't want this to be an exercise in futility. We recognize when a man stands up to open up the Word of God, what is that? It's something that You've prescribed. It's something You've designed. Something can happen. It doesn't always happen, but something can happen. Something transformative, something life-changing, something upbuilding can happen if You but own it. Lord, I pray, own this next hour. Please. I pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Ephesians 4:32. I am reading, actually, the parallel passage; the parallel verse to the 2nd of the 3 that Craig read in the first hour. If you're not already aware, Ephesians and Colossians obviously are not identical books. And there's aspects to them that are not parallel, but there is a great parallelism between the two. Some of the same thoughts and same ideas are communicated in both of them. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you." Now when Craig read it, we weren't conspiring about what we were going to preach today. When he read the three verses that he read I thought, oh no, Craig, don't deal with forgiveness. And he even mentioned Denton I think, and I thought, oh no, where's he going with that? What did you say about Denton? Oh, Jesse's - yeah, when you mentioned that I thought, oh no! He's going to talk about - not Jesse's but somebody else's.

Forgiveness. As many of you are aware, the topic of forgiveness came up at this year's Fellowship Conference in Denton, Texas. And it not only came up, but if you were there, such things happened at the conference that have not happened in others. We had a pastoral response immediately to a sermon that was given. And I know there was disagreement. If you weren't there, it pertained to forgiveness. There was lots of discussion. There's been discussion even here. I almost just went back to my Ephesians study and got away from this, but last time two weeks ago when I preached, there were some folks that were saying we thought you were going to touch on forgiveness. And I think James even said something to me and I thought, well, okay, maybe I should do that. I had some people say they were confused. I had some people that said, well, they heard the message and they weren't confused, and then they heard the two pastors that responded afterwards and they were confused. And it seemed like there was a measure of confusion, and if there's anything that I don't want to have happen, I don't want there to be any confusion on the subject in our church.

So that's I wanted to visit it again. Maybe you listened to all that and you said we don't even know what the big deal was. Maybe you listened to it and you heard exactly what the big deal was and maybe you came down on one side or the other. Look, quite honestly, I am not the guy who's out there on the Internet just looking for a debate, looking for something I disagree with that I can just engage in. I'm not doing this just simply to throw my opinion in to an

ongoing debate. That's not it. And I have no desire to have anybody ask me about the opinions of others, or what brother so-and-so meant, or why did he say this, or why did the other pastor respond this way? I was down in Monterrey one time and in a Q&A time, somebody said, "Could you explain how Charles Leiter's position differs from Josef Urban's position in this?" And it's like, "No, I can't do that." I'm not going to speak for other men. And I don't want to do that. And I don't want to be in the position of trying to tell you what different men mean by what they said. That's not my objective here. What I want to do is simply have us look at Scripture and my aim is pastoral. I'm concerned that we as a church not be confused about the nature of biblical forgiveness.

So I'll get right to the point. Here in Ephesians, the Apostle Paul exhorts Christians - you see it. Look at verse 32: "Forgiving one another..." And here's the big term: "as." And all your Bibles have it. "...As God in Christ forgave you." Now some take this verse to mean this: Well, since we are to forgive as God forgives, let's think, hm, how does God forgive? Well, since God never forgives anybody unless they repent, therefore that's what it means by "forgiving as God forgives." That I will not forgive anybody, or I should not forgive anybody, unless they repent. That's basically how the logic goes. And if in fact we were to forgive the unrepentant, we're not forgiving as God forgives, because God doesn't forgive unless there's repentance.

Now, at first glance, that might sound like tremendous reasoning. It might sound reasonable. It might sound like good logic. But I would propose this to you. That is forcing a meaning here that is not to be found in the context. And one of the things that I fear happened at the conference is this text was brought out of its context and a point that the preacher was already determined to make, he found in this text and he made it with it because it kind of lent itself to it. The problem is that taken in context, I don't believe it bears that meaning at all. And so that's what I want to do.

Brethren, this has to do with proper hermeneutics. If you are going to interpret a verse, don't take the verse by itself. You can come up with a lot of meanings for certain verses if you wrench it out of its context. But if you read the material around it, if you get a feel, especially if you read the whole epistle, and you just get the feeling - what does Paul have in mind here? In this case, I don't believe we have to read the whole epistle at all. All we have to do is go back up to v. 17 and start to capture the feel of the argument that Paul is making here.

Now, before we go back up to v. 17 and begin reading, I want to suggest another meaning. Yes, it means what it says. We are to forgive one another as God forgives us, but when Paul says that we're to forgive one another as God forgives us, the meaning is not that we're only supposed to forgive those who repent. Rather, the meaning is that I am to freely bestow my forgiveness to those who do not deserve it, just like God bestows His forgiveness to those who do not deserve it. That's the issue. And I'll prove that to you from the context. My point is this: Paul isn't even dealing with the terms of forgiveness. Like: The person I'm forgiving, do they need to have repented or not? He's not dealing with the terms. He's dealing with the heart. He's dealing with the individual. He's not even concerned about whether the other person is repentant or non-repentant - that's not the issue here. And I hope to convince you. The idea that Paul is teaching here that God only forgives those who repent, so we're only to forgive those who repent - that seems to miss the whole point of the passage.

Now, let's look at it. Ephesians 4:17, "For this I say and testify in the Lord that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do." Now, you probably should stop right there because that's the context. The context is: Gentile conduct versus the conduct of those who have learned of Christ. Old man conduct versus new man conduct. Listen, the problem with the Gentiles is not that they indiscriminately forgive everybody. Over against, contrasted with the Christian who properly does it just like God does and only forgives those who repent. See, that's not the problem of the Gentile. The Gentile problem is not that they forgive everybody; that they forgive even people that aren't repentant. That's not even the thought here. "We must no longer walk as the Gentiles do..." How do they walk? "...In the futility of their minds, they're darkened in their understanding, they're alienated from the life of God." That's the issue. You know, the new man is created in the likeness of God. The old man, the lost man, the Gentile - totally disconnected from God "because of the ignorance that is in them due to their hardness of heart. They have become calloused and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity."

But notice this - here's the contrast. "But that is not the way you learned Christ." I love that. I can't wait till we get to that. Because that is Paul looking at what is it that makes a true Christian who is no longer a Gentile? He's looked at Christ and he's learned of Christ. And you can tell. Paul means that if you've learned Him, your conduct, your action, your behavior, your character is stamped by that image. Now, he says this: v. 21, "...assuming that you have heard about Him." He doesn't look at everybody that's listening to him and think, oh yeah, they've got to be Christians because they're sitting in the church or because they're hearing this epistle read to them. He says, of course, assuming that you did hear about Him "...and were taught in Him as the truth is in Jesus." And what is this truth in Jesus? "To put off your old man." I know the ESV says "self." The word is "man." The old man. The old you. "...Which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires." And to be received, or renewed, "...in the spirit of your minds." So you see that, a renewing of the mind. You put off the old man. You see this comparison. Gentile - you learn Christ. New man over against old man. The mind. V. 24, "to put on the new self created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." What's Paul's point here? Look, you cannot possibly continue to live the old kind of life. That's what he's saying. Not if you've learned Christ - you can't. It's not possible. Not if you've really learned Christ, and you really do know the truth as it is in Jesus. That's what he's saying. It's an impossibility. This is not the way you've learned Christ. Assuming you have. That's the issue. You're no longer what you once were. You're a new man. You're not the old man - carried about by all those deceitful passions. This is the comparison here. This is the back and forth.

So what happens? Well, you put off the old man. You put on the new. You know what happens in v. 25? In v. 25, Paul begins to touch specific realities. He begins to touch on specifics. Notice this, v. 25, "Put away falsehood." You see, he generally says you put away the old man. You put it off. You put on the new. In v. 25, what he does is he breaks out in some very particulars about how that manifests itself in real life. And you see the contrast here back and forth. You have "put away falsehood." So what do you put on? Well, "let each of you speak the truth with his neighbor." And we could pull stuff out, but it's very obvious in verses like 25. V. 28, "Let the thief no longer steal." That's what you put off. But what do you put on? You labor, but not only labor, you do honest work with your hands. But not only that, so that you might have

something to give. You see, the old manner of life - the new manner of life. There's these contrasts going back and forth. Well, the reality is, v. 31 and 32 are a contrast. And you need to capture that. Because if you capture the contrast of these two verses, you recognize right away, Paul is not contrasting Gentiles who indiscriminately forgive everybody, and saying, "oh no, we shouldn't do that. You need to put that off. And you need to put on forgiving people the way God forgives, and He only forgives the repentant." That's not even here, folks. Look at the contrast. "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away." You see again: put away, put away. What is it that we put off? "...Along with all malice." And then what do we put on? Kindness: "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ forgave you." Do you see it? The "put away."

You know how contrast works? You have opposites. And the opposite of kind, tender, forgiving, is not undiscerning and forgiving everybody. The opposite is being bitter and not forgiving at all. That's the issue. Angry, wrathful, clamorous, slanderous. Paul isn't even thinking about the person who offends me and whether they've repented or not. That's not even on his radar. The conduct of that person - he isn't thinking that. Paul is concerned that we put on an expression of the conduct of those who are new men - no longer Gentiles. The expression of those who have learned of Christ. What he's concerned with is the new man that's in the likeness of God. And what is God like? God is a forgiving God. God is rich in mercy. We read that here in this epistle. "Rich in mercy because of the great love with which He loved us." Mercy, grace. And the thing is, we don't deserve any of it. And yet He freely bestowed - yes, we repented, but that's not the issue. The issue is you didn't deserve any of it at all. That's the issue.

Notice, the companions here. It's not that he's pointing out: you need to be discerning as to who's repented or not. That isn't the companions of forgiveness here. The companions are kindness and tenderheartedness. Do you see what the issue is? He's not concerned about the conditions. He's not concerned about the shape of the person that has offended us. He's concerned about what's coming out of us. He's concerned about what that looks like. Kindness, tenderheartedness. These are the companions of forgiveness. Just as the companion of bitterness is what? It's wrath. It's anger. It's being hateful. It's being unforgiving.

Bitterness. What is bitterness? You know bitter people - doesn't the word "sour"? Just sour people. They're bitter. They're unloving. They're unkind. They never find good in anything. They just seem to relish holding a grudge. I mean, sometimes it's amazing, you sit down with some people, and they will bring up something from the past - it could have happened years ago - like it happened yesterday. Just not forgiving, never forgetting. And then slanderous. That's a companion there too. Because they just can't speak well of people. That's the idea. But that's not the way we've learned Christ. This is what it is to still walk as the Gentiles do in all that bitterness and ugliness. You see, that's what it is to be the old man. When Paul's unwrapping all of this, he's not even interested in the terms of repentance. He's interested in a God-likeness being reflected by us. A tenderness, a kindness, a disposition to forgive. The renewing of the mind - we saw that there - verse 23. "Be renewed in the spirit of your minds." You see, is this not the issue behind forgiveness? It's that there's a change in the mind.

And we might go over there - we're not going to take the time right now - but we might go to that extended parable there in Matthew 18 because it just gives such the mindset. What happens? I'm saved! I freely forgive! Why? Well, yes, I'm changed. Yes, I'm a new man. Yes, I'm no longer a Gentile. But I'm renewed in the spirit of my mind. In my mind! Something has happened in my thinking. Look, it's not that I don't realize that there are people who have sinned against me or offended me. But you know what you begin to realize? I've offended other people and I've sinned against other people, but more than that, I have sinned against God and I have done such things to despise His glory. I realize how kind He's been to me when I did not deserve it, and to be gripped by the fact of what God has done for you if you're a Christian! I mean, that's the thing. How can you hold a grudge? How can you be bitter when all you have to do is look at yourself in the mirror and recognize... you know, just start to list your crimes and imagine people that have done half your crimes and they've been in hell... You've sinned against light that people back killed in the flood, they never had. And if it's going to be more tolerable for people in Sodom and Gomorrah than for people in this age who've heard that, you know what it tells me? It tells me that there are people who died in that flood that are far less guilty because they had far less light than you. They've been in hell for millennia suffering, weeping, wailing - and justly, because their crimes demanded it. You look at God.

Remember back to chapter 2. "While you were still dead in your trespasses," what happened? God had mercy because of His great love with which He loved you. He made you alive in Christ even when you were dead in your trespasses. Remember what God did for you when you were unrepentant. What happened? When you were yet sinners, Christ died for you. Unrepentant - before your repentance. Remember, God grants repentance to the Gentiles. Have you ever read that? Just think about how God is moving, what God is doing. We love Him because He first loved us. You just have to stop sometimes and think. Be blown away by what God has done for you because if you have that change of mind; if that goes on; if that's the renewing of mind where you're grateful and you're thankful, how can you look at somebody else who's committed so much less? Isn't that the parable there in Matthew 18? My debt was huge! It makes it really difficult. That's the issue in all of this. All the undeserved love and sacrifice - He spared not His only Son! When you get gripped by this reality you're suddenly freed from the power of bitterness. You show me a bitter Christian, a bitter and unforgiving Christian, and I'm going to show you somebody that is deceived. They're not a Christian. I can say that on biblical grounds. They're not a Christian. You see, it's in this way that God just sets us free to be kind to those who don't deserve.

Do you recognize this? When somebody sins against you, that sin is a capital offense before God. They don't deserve to be pardoned. They deserve to be damned. But when you forgive them, you're being God-like. That's the issue. That's the issue. It's not terms of forgiveness. It's the fact that you're forgiving those who don't deserve your forgiveness. You're pardoning those who don't in any way deserve it. Just like you didn't deserve it. See, that's the issue. That's what we really need to focus on. You get people - I know there are people who have been horribly wounded by others. But we're able to forgive those things. They don't deserve to be forgiven. Why? Because God has forgiven you. He's forgiven me. Paul doesn't even remotely have in mind terms of forgiveness. That's not it. This is all about your attitude, about your disposition as a new man forgiving out of love, kindness, tenderness towards others.

So, okay, you might say, okay, brother, we see that. That is the contrast. Contrasts are opposites. The opposite to forgiving as God forgives is bitterness. It's wrath, it's anger, it's obviously unforgiveness. That's the issue. The opposite Paul was bringing out is not: you're not of a discerning spirit and you need to figure out who's repentant and who's not and only forgive the repentant. That's not the issue. But you say, okay, even if Ephesians 4:32 isn't specifically saying that, you haven't really proven that that nevertheless is the case because maybe it's taught somewhere else. And I would say, that's right. That's right, but because this is a foundational text to holding that position, I wanted to show you that that's not what it's teaching.

But here's what I want to show you next. If you possess this heart of the new man, this God-likeness, true righteousness and holiness, if this characterizes you, you're one who's learned of Christ. That is going to manifest itself in at least three ways that I want to show you from Scripture, that I think just destroys this whole mindset.

The first one, brethren, is 1 Peter 4:8. And you need to turn there, and you need to see this. "Love covers a multitude of sin." You know, if you look at the text in Scripture like Craig looked at this morning, that give like this "above all," or, you've got that word here. Love. There's lots of Scriptures in the New Testament - this is the pinnacle; this is the sum of what it means to reflect Christ. "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly since love covers a multitude of sins." Now, if you take that text - before I say what I'm going to say - let me just point something out. The word "cover" - that is a synonym for forgive. If you say, hey, I'm not buying it. The word forgive isn't here. I don't think "cover" means the same thing. What does "cover" mean? Cover basically means to hide or to bury.

And Scripture definitely uses these two terms side by side to express the forgiveness of sins. And we can look at different places, but the classic text would be this one. You don't need to turn there, but listen to it. Psalm 32:1, "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." That is a Hebrew parallelism where you basically have the same thing stated back-to-back in different terms. Covering sin is the same thing as forgiving sin. Covering sin is at the heart of what it means. It's the essence of what forgiveness is. It's to cover it over. It's to bury it. It's to hide it. That's the idea. What I want to show you is this, "Above all, keep loving one another earnestly." And you see, here's the thing. Here's what Peter sees. As the love increases, that church's ability to cover sin increases. Earnestly. Be earnest. Why? Because where there's much love, there's much covering. Where there's lovelessness, people become suspicious, they become critical, there's criticism. They put the worst spin on things. That's what happens. And it's like, if for no other reason, Peter goes right to this point that love is going to produce that kind of fruit. It's going to produce that kind of looking past small offenses and maybe even some larger ones.

Lovelessness. Lovelessness. What happens then? People are easily provoked. You know, we talk about being thin-skinned. Thin-skinned churches where people - it takes very little to provoke somebody. They're always easily offended. Always magnifying the wrongs committed against us. But love... Where love abounds, love is going to look past. Love is going to cover over. Love covers a multitude of sins. Many of the small and even some of the larger ones, they're readily overlooked. They're readily forgotten. The New American Standard - Craig quoted this earlier - but 1 Corinthians 13:5 (don't turn there), but the New American Standard says it this way: "Love does not take into account a wrong suffered." The ESV says "resentful."

The old King James says, "thinketh no evil." But it's the idea of imputing evil. You see, where there's no love, people read things as evil. They put that spin on it. "Oh, you know why they did that." "I'm offended." There's always this suspicion, looking at people through those lenses. But where love is there, it's like I love that brother. And it's like John MacArthur says. He just views people based on what they're going to become and what they'll be in Heaven. That helps him.

Now look, I know that there's two classic exceptions to this. There's two places in Scripture that clearly indicate that it's impossible to give a full expression of forgiveness unless there is a full, two-way transaction in the forgiveness process. And it's those cases spelled out in Luke 17 and Matthew 18. Now again, don't turn there please. But it's those texts that basically, and here's the thing, if you look at Luke 17. Let me read it to you. Don't turn there. Luke 17 says this, "Pay attention to yourselves. If your brother sins, rebuke him. If he repents..." there's repentance. "If he repents..." that's conditional. "...forgive him. If he sins against you seven times in the day, turns to you seven times saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." Now, the interesting thing is if you look at the context of that, that is basically Luke's account of what you find in Matthew 18 where you get the fuller expression. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you..." Now, the word repentance isn't used there, but if he listens to you - it's the same idea. "...You've gained your brother, but if he does not listen..." and it goes on. So obviously there repentance is mandatory or you actually put the person out of the church.

But here's the thing, that approach is clearly from what Peter is teaching us not the way to deal with everything. There are times when forgiveness should be the unconditional response of love. That is what Peter is teaching us. Are there times when something is aggravated enough or are there times when somebody's sin is hurting other people and we need, out of love for them, out of love for the whole church, out of the love for the church and not allowing leaven to leaven the whole lump, are there times when love demands that we do pursue the sin? Absolutely. Are there times that love demands that we do pursue repentance? Absolutely. But what Peter is teaching us is that love will often manifest itself exactly like this where forgiveness is rendered to people as an unconditional response of love. Which is much to say that there are many times where we are going to deal with sin simply by covering it over and sweeping it under the rug. That's what he's teaching.

You say, "(Gasp!) We can't do that!" That's not the way God does it. Well see, if you put that meaning on forgiveness then you come to that conclusion. But again, I want to emphasize, the heart of this is kindness and it's tenderness. And when you have a church full of those kinds of people... let me just ask you. How do you want to be treated? Do you want to be in a church where every single offense, somebody's right there? That's grounds for confrontation! Matthew 18! Did you see him? He didn't say hi! Confront him! He wasn't loving! That wasn't loving! He wasn't smiling! Have you ever been around people that want to attack you for everything? You don't want to be in a church like that. (incomplete thought) You know what it is to be around people that are kind and tenderhearted and how they deal with your rough edges and inconsiderateness and impoliteness and immaturities and the too often, frequent, petty infractions... right? We're not a perfect people. And we come in here with all of our rough edges. Do you want somebody right there? "Matthew 18! Matthew 18! I saw it!" No, you don't want to be in that. But you do want to be in a church where if sin has a grip on you in a way that's

harming the church or harming you, you want somebody to deal with it. If it's the kind of leaven that's really destructive to the church, then out of love for all the church, we definitely want to deal with it. You know, there's just a feel. Like Paul said to the Corinthians. I think it has somewhat of the feel of this. You had Christians that were suing each other. And he said it's better to be wronged. In other words, you would do better to drop the court case against your brother. Just accept being wronged. Let it go. Forgive and go on your way. Better to be defrauded than do what you're doing. I think that has something of the spirit of that. So that's the first thing. Brethren, you can't get away from it. You cannot get away from it that Peter is teaching that there are many sins that love covers without any condition on the part of the offender. That is the reality. He sees the church, in fact, the higher the love is, the more we are going to unilaterally, unconditionally, without requiring repentance of the individual going to sweep it under the rug. That's what he sees and that's why he wants that kind of fervent love here. He's not looking for a holy church. That's not the issue. The issue is kindness, tenderness, forgiving. That is entirely the opposite of unholy.

But here's the next thing. Here's the next thing that the spirit that Paul is wanting us to reflect of the new man, here's another way that it manifests itself. It manifests itself in our prayer life. Every place where Jesus talks about forgiving when we pray - unconditional. And I want you to see it. First one, Sermon on the Mount. Go to Matthew 6. I do want you to turn to these. Here is another manifestation of the new man who's robed with kindness and tenderness and forgiveness. His prayer life is a constant witness to his forgiving spirit. If you don't know about this, I want to challenge you. Obviously, Jesus is not giving us in any of these accounts an exact formula for how we should pray. When He says, "pray like this: Our Father Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name..." He certainly isn't saying that you need to articulate that verbatim. When He says pray like this, He's meaning capture the essence of His prayer. Those should be areas of emphasis in your own prayer life. Matthew 6:9, "Pray then like this, 'Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread...'" Now notice this. It doesn't speak of transgressions. It doesn't speak of sins specifically, but the idea here is our debts. "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."

Now if you define a debtor, what is a debtor? Somebody who owes you something. They owe. That's the idea behind a debtor. The idea here is you have debtors, which means what? When somebody sins against you, they owe you something. That's the issue of hell. You see, this is the problem with sin. We incur a debt with God that we just simply can't pay. And Jesus paid it. All of it. But here's the idea, this says "our debtors." There's no distinguishing or delineating between the debtor who repents and the debtor who doesn't repent. None of that. "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." V. 14, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." Nothing to do with whether they've repented or not.

I want you to see this again in Mark's Gospel. Mark 11:25. Because Mark and Luke bring this out in especially helpful terms. Mark and Luke. Mark 11:25, "Whenever you stand praying, forgive if you have anything against anyone." What are you going to say about that? That is

entirely inclusive. There's no exceptions there. "So that your Father also who is in Heaven may forgive you your trespasses."

Now go over to Luke 11. Because we see it again. And again we have this superlative. I mean, just a word that's all-encompassing. It's big. It's vast. Luke 11:2, "He said to them, when you pray, say, 'Father, hallowed be Your name, Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us, and lead us not into temptation...'" Here's the thing. Here's the thing about the new man who's put on Christ; who's being transformed more and more into the likeness of God. True righteousness. True holiness. He is able to go before God in prayer, and you can see, Jesus wants us talking to God about forgiveness.

Now isn't that interesting? Let's just stop right there. Why? This is how a Christian is to pray. Why should I be asking God for forgiveness? Let me ask you this. Do you believe in the doctrine of justification by faith? Do you believe that the day that you first genuinely believed that all your sins were washed away? Then why are you still praying for forgiveness? However you answer that question, let me ask you something. Has God already forgiven you before you repent? I'm hoping so! You see, the argument even concerning God and how He forgives sin doesn't really stand because there's a myriad of examples of God forgiving sinners of their sin before that sin was even committed. I mean, if we really believe in the doctrine of justification by faith, and we really believe that all of our sins are pardoned, at a previous time we're declared righteous in the courtroom of God - and yet, Jesus is teaching us as Christians we should still be confessing our sins. That's part of being a Christian. Why? Well, if we do sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous. If we confess our sins, He's faithful and just to forgive them. There is no question that in our relationship with God in an ongoing fashion, there's a place for bearing our souls and confessing our sins to God. What Jesus is teaching us is when you do, you should specifically refer to how you forgive other people. Isn't that clear from all of these texts? He wants us mindful of that. The reality is that the new man who's convinced that God has saved him of all these sins that he didn't deserve to be forgiven of, he can go before God in his prayer life and he can look up and he can look into the very face of God, and he can say, "Father, forgive me, because I know I haven't been perfect. I know I haven't, but forgive me as I forgive others."

And not just a put on like Craig was talking about. This isn't just something you say. This isn't just lip service. This isn't some hypocritical statement that you lift up to God and there's no reality in it. You don't say it unless you mean it. Which means, you ought to be able to do inventory every time you pray. And ask yourself, is there anybody - do you do that? I find that absolutely necessary. I want a clear way to the Lord. And it's like I can't go to the Lord if there's something on my conscience. I consider that to be a prayer-stopper. It's more serious than that. You can tell from these texts. But I consider that to be a prayer-stopper if there's any kind of bitterness, any kind of separation. If I feel like I know somebody in the church has this thing against me and I have not yet tried to resolve that - it's one thing if you try to resolve it and as much as possible, you're seeking to be at peace with all men and you've done what's possible in your power. There's some things that no matter how hard you try... but we ought to be able to say that. Even people who have never repented. It's like, Lord, I have forgiven them. I'm not

holding anything. I don't know of any grudge that I have against anybody. There's no bitterness. You want that! That's clearly what Jesus is saying. Your prayer life.

And you can see, there's not a word here in any of these verses about repentance. It's not the issue. Forgiveness here - it doesn't come in. The man who knows that he's forgiven only in and through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, he's a man who's constrained to forgive others. It really should be easy. I mean, I'm telling you, if I had some four billion dollar debt with the bank, and they forgave it, and then somebody that owes me \$40 comes and says they can't pay, it's like seriously? Am I going to have the guy strung up? It's like God has forgiven me for so much! Don't worry about it, brother! But it's debt. And we feel it different. We feel it more than just financial because it's personal, and it's insult, and it's offensive because we're talking about sins; we're talking about people wrong us. Just having a debt against us isn't necessarily wrong. Maybe not being able to pay it, there's some wrongness in that, so we can take it personally. But we don't have to take it personally because God hasn't taken it so personally that He's cast us into hell. He so loved the world that He put His own Son on that cross and He allowed Him to suffer what He suffered. He crushed Him under His wrath. He put that cup to His lips. He poured His soul out like water.

And what are we going to do? Look at this Son of God - (incomplete thought) among the sons of men - here you've got John the Baptist, and Jesus says the things He says about him, and he says I'm not worthy to touch the latchet on his sandal. We have One worth that much and God did not spare Him, but gave Him up for us, who were what? Useless, worthless, weak, wretched, hell-deserving. We were children of wrath like the rest of mankind. And we're going to look at that and after everything that God has done for us? In our prayer, there ought to be such gratitude and thankfulness and a realization - this is the renewing of the mind. Not always going before God where you feel insulted, like I haven't gotten out of life what I deserve. God, give me, give me, give me! (Incomplete thought) When you go before the Lord and there's gratitude, like, "Lord, I cannot believe You saved me." It's really hard to look at somebody else and say, "I'm not forgiving you." I'm going to harbor this grudge, so just deal with it. So our prayer life, clearly this prayer life, there's no aspect here of whether they've repented or not. The prayer life is it should be one where it's all covered; it's all released. I'm not harboring it. Yes, I know that some individuals may need to repent in order for there to be reconciliation and for relationships to be restored the way that would be best. But that isn't the issue.

And the last one that I want to bring up here is this: Paul specifically mentions learning Jesus. Assuming that you have heard of Him and have been taught the truth as it is in Jesus. But he assumes that we've learned of Christ. Brethren, we do not want to minimize or dismiss or explain away our Lord Jesus Christ on that cross saying "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." If you look at that, and you tear that apart to where He was praying for their forgiveness, but it doesn't say Jesus forgave them - if you want to try to make that distinction, I think you are trying to separate what God never meant to be separated. Let's look at that. Luke 23:33. Have you learned Christ? Here's the classroom. Let us come and sit at His feet and learn. The new man is a man who's learned Christ. Let us learn. Luke 23:33. "When they came to the place that is called the Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on His right hand and one on His left. And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.'" Now, here's one thing we know for a fact. They're crucifying Him - no evidence that they've

repented. No evidence of that at all. There's no reason to assume it. Who is He speaking about? Probably both Jews and Romans. They're both killing Him. (Incomplete thought) Jesus specifically said to Pilate, (the Jews) crime, their sin is greater, but He wasn't saying therefore you have no crime in this. He's praying for them. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." I say this again. We dare not try to explain this away by saying that there's no actual forgiveness taking place in this text. Or, that Jesus is only praying for their forgiveness, but since no repentance has taken place, there's no forgiveness of any sort here. Now look, I recognize they need to repent if His Father is going to forgive them. But I'm not talking about what God does, I'm talking about the heart of Christ in this. That's the issue.

Answer me this. What is forgiveness? Forgiveness means - you can look it up in your lexicons - it means to let go. That's good right? Even if we're talking about a debt. You let go. We could use "cover." That's good imagery as well. It means to let go. Jesus - notice - has He let go? Is He bitter? Wrathful? Angry? Clamorous? Slanderous? All those things that Paul was describing? Or has He let go? Jesus unconditionally is showing them kindness and tenderness here. He's let go. If this isn't forgiveness, how else would you define it? I mean, the attitude - because that's what Paul's concerned about. It's the attitude. It's the kind attitude. It's the tender attitude. It's the God-like attitude of not holding our crimes against us and forgiving us when we don't deserve it. Is that not what's flowing from Christ here? Kindness and tenderness. What did they deserve? They're killing the Son of God! One of the greatest crimes ever committed. He's not holding on to it. There's no grudge. There's no bitterness. He's let go. You can call that, you can define that by whatever terminology you want, but you need to learn of Christ. Put the term on it you want, but that's the spirit of the new man. And you see it. You see it projected right onto Stephen.

Acts 7:58 - just one last place I want you to turn. Acts 7:58. Because here comes a disciple of Christ. The martyr Stephen. And we know - we know that the Spirit that was so pervasive in the life of Christ is shining forth from Stephen as well. In Acts 7:58, "then they cast him out of the city and stoned him." You should probably think about stoning before you just read over it too quickly. In fact, probably if you looked on YouTube, I imagine with everything out there today you can probably find pictures, because there's enough women usually who have been stoned in the Middle East. "The witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul, and as they were stoning Stephen, he called out..." You imagine - a rock hits you. I mean, bang - concussion. Bang - your teeth are out. Bang - your rib is broken. And what's happening? He's not just covering up and thinking about defending himself. "'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit,' falling to his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" There's the spirit of it. Stephen's prayers for those who stoned him. Another example. Example of what? They're not repenting - they're killing him. Obviously there's no repentance.

But the issue is this, unilateral - you know what that means? That's the opposite of bilateral - well, not the opposite, because you could have trilateral. But it's the idea of: all by yourself. Unconditional. You're not requiring anything of them. You just unilaterally, unconditionally let it go. You're forgiving them. The fact that Stephen prayed for God's mercy on his murderers shows that he has already forgiven them. Now it's true, God's forgiveness is not going to be granted to them apart from their repentance. That is absolutely true. But Stephen

himself - what has he done? He's already made a deliberate, conscious choice to relinquish his right to vengeance, to retribution. He's let it go. He's forgiven them from his heart. Again, if you don't like the term forgiveness, what in the world is forgiveness if it's not that? That's what we want in the church. That's the kind of reaction to people that we want. If somebody had suffered such things as Christ and Stephen have suffered and they came into this church and yet they were manifesting tenderness and kindness and a willingness to let go like these men, we wouldn't be scrambling for terms. We would say, wow, that's a forgiving person. Why? Because that's the way we use the term, and that's what it means. It means to let go of things like that. Call this what you will. You may argue that it doesn't say Jesus forgave them. It doesn't say Stephen forgave them in either of these passages. But I would just appeal to this, what does it mean to forgive? Because if it doesn't mean what these guys are doing, I have no clue what it means. To me, that's... well, you say, to you? That's your opinion. This is what the term means. It means to let go.

What's the point in all of this? My point is this: there's not a time - whether people have repented or not - there's not a time to hold grudges or bitterness. There's not a time that we shouldn't let go. Now, I recognize, I recognize there's times when to have reconciliation and have the relationship restored, we need repentance from the other person. And I recognize there's times to say to people in the church, unless you repent, we're putting you out. But you know what, even when we have to do that, we can let go. Even when we have to do that, love can be dictating - not selfishness; not this self-bitterness. This is the attitude. Even when we have to discipline people, we can manifest a disposition like Stephen, like Christ. "Father, forgive them." I mean, we fear for them. You know when we discipline people out of the church, I think where their path is going to lead if they don't repent. I say, Lord, please - especially after coming under the truth and experiencing the light - their hell is going to be greater. I fear for people. You tremble for them. But this is the heart. This is the heart. Kindness, tenderness, forgiving as God in Christ forgave you. The issue isn't the terms of repentance. The issue is: you didn't deserve it, and God forgave you beyond your wildest dreams! Hasn't He done things for you that are so out there you can't hardly believe it? Then, in the light of that and that mindset, let go.

Father, I pray, give us this spirit. May it be pervasive here. I ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.