

## Forgiveness and Restoration Among Believers

By Dr. David A. DeWitt

- *What does it mean to forgive and restore someone?*
- *Who should be forgiven and who should be restored?*
- *Does restoration mean restoration to fellowship or restoration to a position?*

This is one of the oldest and most troublesome issues in the church. For example, one of the biggest questions in the church of the 100s and 200s (the centuries of the great persecutions and martyrdoms) was: Should those who have denied Christ, under persecution, be restored to fellowship if they repent of it? Through the centuries the church has had to deal with those who seek restoration after committing fraud, adultery, perjury, and nearly every serious sin.

### Defining Key Terms

**Forgiveness** is the act of violating justice (an eye for an eye) by accepting upon ourselves the hurtful consequences of someone's action. So if we hope for justice, seek revenge, harbor bitterness, or maintain hatred, we have not forgiven.

**Restoration** is the act of bringing someone back to a former state by reestablishing the former condition.

**Confession** is a public proclamation of sin or wrong doing. [Repentance means a change of mind, but the Bible uses these two terms interchangeably (1 John 1:9, Luke 24:47).]

### Three Basic Principles of Forgiveness

#### 1. We should never forgive people of their sin against God.

Forgiveness of sin is seen in the Bible strictly as an act of God. Daniel wrote, *To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness, for we have rebelled against Him* (Daniel 9:9). The reason forgiveness is up to God is because all sin (i.e., anything contrary to the character of God) is done against God. David committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah sent to the front lines of battle until he was killed. When confronted with and convicted about his sin, David prayed, *Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight, so that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, and blameless when Thou dost judge* (Psalm 51:4). David, in his hour of deepest remorse, begs God for forgiveness. The text never says David asked the forgiveness of, say, Bathsheba or Uriah's family. From God's perspective, the basic sin was not committed against Bathsheba or Uriah. Uriah went to heaven right on schedule. And Bathsheba's baby was not an accident. The wrong was done against God, Who commanded people not to commit adultery and murder. There is not one single command in the Bible for any human being to forgive anyone else of sin against God. (See also Luke 15:18, 21.) This is the vertical aspect of sin. Now let's consider the horizontal aspect.

#### 2. We must always forgive people of their sin against us (Matthew 18:21-22).

Here sin refers to the hurtful consequences our sin against God has on other people. The effects of sin are never confined to the sinner. *Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."* Peter is referring back to a statement Christ made recorded in verse 15, *And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother.* Peter is wondering, if my brother confesses but keeps on sinning, how long do I keep on forgiving him? Christ answers with a parable about a king who forgave a slave his debt until he learned that this slave did not forgive a debt which was owed him. Christ's point is, if you don't keep on forgiving your brother, why should God keep on forgiving you (Matthew 18:35)? (See also Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Mark 11:25; and Ephesians 4:32).

### **3. We must continue to forgive those who continue to ask for forgiveness and those who do not (Luke 17:3-4 and 23:34).**

*Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him (Luke 17:3-4).*

Suppose someone borrows money from you and does not pay it back. Instead, they come to you asking forgiveness of the debt. You are commanded to forgive the debt. If he borrows more money and does the same, you must forgive him each time. It may be that you will determine it is unwise or not good for him to keep loaning him more money. But if you do continue to loan to him and he continues to ask you to forgive him (let go of, omit, etc.) the debt, then you must do so.

*But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34; see also Matthew 6:14-15 and Ephesians 4:32).*

Christ extends the forgiveness from those who ask for it to those who do not ask for it or even acknowledge their sin. To be Christlike, therefore, means to forgive those causing us suffering even though they do not ask for it and even when they feel justified by causing us suffering. Remember, my forgiveness is taking on the consequences of another's sin. It has only to do with me, not him. Forgiveness does not presuppose reconciliation or necessarily lead to it. That is a different issue.

## **Three Basic Principles of Restoration**

**1. We should restore to fellowship anyone who humbles themselves and asks for forgiveness** (1 Samuel 24:16-22; 26:21, 25; Galatians 6:1-5; see again Matthew 18:21-22 and Luke 17:3-4 listed above). Apologies must be sincere and genuine. "I'm sorry ... but" is not an apology. But every genuine request for forgiveness must be met with restoration of fellowship, no matter how many times it's repeated due to repetition of the offense. Saul kept trying to kill David, and David restored fellowship with him each time Saul asked for it. Notice: (1) corrective measures may be necessary to help that one (restored to fellowship) stay away from a particular sin (2 Corinthians 2:6) and (2) corrective measures must be limited and in the context of comfort and reaffirmation of love (2 Corinthians 2:7-11).

**2. We should restore anyone who humbles himself and asks for forgiveness to their former position** (2 Chronicles 33:6, 12, 13; 2 Samuel 12:13-14; Psalm 51:4; and Matthew 26:75). Manasseh, a king of Israel who was an idolator early in life, repented. God restored him to the throne, although He removed him from office until he repented. David committed several sins for which he was punished by God; the people around him also suffering the consequences of his sin. But he was never removed from his position, as Saul was, since Saul ultimately did not repent. Peter denied Christ but was obviously repentant of it and was never removed as one of the apostles.

**3. Restoration does not erase the consequences of the sin.** There is only so much fellow believers can do for a repentant sinner. They can restore them to fellowship and even to their former position, but they cannot wipe out the sin (only God can do that) or its effects. Here are some examples:

- *Restoration of fellowship may not restore trust.* David forgave Saul, but he did not trust him (1 Samuel 27:1). That does not mean we are free to gossip or harbor bitterness by thinking something like, *I can forgive, but I can't forget*, when that means we continue to dwell on their sin or hold it over them. That is not forgiveness. It simply means their responsibilities may need to be altered until trust is restored.
- *Restoration cannot overcome loss of qualifications to fill a position.* If a person, for example, is divorced or remarried or becomes addicted to alcohol or drugs or has destroyed his reputation in the community, he is not qualified to be an administrative leader in the church (1 Timothy 3:2-7). He should be removed from leadership not as a punishment but simply because he does not now meet the biblical qualifications for the position.
- *Restoration cannot restore a lost ability to serve.* Parenting, in the Bible, is a married thing not a single thing. Divorce ends parenting in the sense of setting and enforcing moral boundaries (Proverbs 22:6). Sin leading to unfaithfulness to God or immaturity may keep someone from teaching others (2 Timothy 2:2, Hebrews 5:11-12). Other believers can restore such a one to fellowship, but they cannot give them faithfulness or maturity. This is not a punishment, it's just the way it is.

## Questions and Answers

**Q:** *What does it mean to forgive and restore someone?*

**A:** To forgive someone is to willingly suffer the destructive consequences of someone else's sin. To restore someone is to reestablish their former condition.

**Q:** *Who should be forgiven and who should be restored?*

**A:** All who sin against us should be forgiven, but restoration requires repentance.

**Q:** *Does restoration mean restoration to fellowship or restoration to a position?*

**A:** Both, but that does not mean a person will still be qualified for the position.