

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

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Forgiveness and reconciliation are not subjects for just the *Yom Kippur* season. Both of them are, in fact, attributes of God Himself and, without them, we could try (as earnestly as we could) to repent of our sins, but our attempts would be to no avail. God's willingness to forgive us and restore His relationship with us, are the only reasons that our attempts to repent are effective. During the Mosaic Covenant, God's requirement of the Israelites in order to receive forgiveness for their sins was that they first repent and then follow up their repentance by sacrificing sheep and goats in the Tabernacle (and later the Temple). But we today are subject to the New Covenant; in this Covenant, God still requires us to sacrifice, but just as He provided a substitute sacrifice for Abraham (the goat in the thicket), He has provided a substitute sacrifice for us in the person of His beloved son Yeshua. So for us, God's willingness to forgive our sins is predicated on two things – our sincere repentance, and our affirmation and adoption of Yeshua's sacrifice as our own.

But it is not God's forgiveness of us that I want to speak about today, but rather our forgiveness of each other, the two of which, you will see shortly, are related. For some reason, men find it hard to forgive, and we often judge each other even more harshly than God judges us. The result is that we often withhold our forgiveness from those who have hurt us, while God Himself does not withhold His forgiveness from us when we hurt Him!

Yeshua was confronted with this issue when Peter asked Him in Matthew 18:21:

"Rabbi, how often can my brother sin against me and I have to forgive him? As many as seven times?" (CJB)

And Yeshua's answer to him in verse 22 was:

"No, not seven times, .. but seventy times seven!" (CJB)

Then Yeshua followed with a parable to help explain to Peter the importance of forgiveness (Matthew 18:23-35); the parable went this way:

"Because of this, the Kingdom of Heaven may be compared with a king who decided to settle accounts with his deputies. Right away they brought forward a man who owed him many millions; and since he couldn't pay, his master ordered that he, his wife, his children and all his possessions be sold to pay the debt. But the servant fell down before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' So out of pity for him, the master let him go and forgave the debt. But as that servant was leaving, he came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him some tiny sum. He grabbed him and began to choke him, crying, 'Pay back what you owe me!' His fellow servant fell before him and begged, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused; instead, he had him thrown in jail until he should repay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were extremely distressed; and they went and told their master everything that had taken place. Then the master summoned his servant and said, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt just because you begged me to do it. Shouldn't you have had pity on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And in anger his master turned him over to the jailers for punishment until he paid back everything he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat you, unless you each forgive your brother from your hearts." (CJB)

While there is no explicit commandment in the *Torah* requiring that we forgive our brother, there is a commandment that means the same thing; in Leviticus 19:17 God says:

"Do not hate your brother in your heart, but rebuke your neighbor frankly, so that you won't carry sin because of him. Don't take vengeance on or bear a grudge against any of your people; rather, love your neighbor as yourself; I am ADONAI." (CJB)

Rabbinic literature endorses the principle of forgiving others and gives, as the example we are to follow, Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers that we read about in Genesis 50:16-21:

So they [Joseph's brothers] sent a message to Yosef which said, "Your father gave this order before he died: 'Say to Yosef, "I beg you now, please forgive your brothers' crime and wickedness in doing you harm."' So now, we beg of you, forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Yosef wept when they spoke to him; and his brothers too came, prostrated themselves before him and said, "Here, we are your slaves." But Yosef said to them, "Don't be afraid! Am I in the place of God? You meant to do me harm, but God meant it for good- so that

it would come about as it is today, with many people's lives being saved. So don't be afraid- I will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he comforted them, speaking kindly to them. (CJB)

But back to Yeshua: Notice that when Peter asked Yeshua how many times he had to forgive his brother, he asked it just that way, using the expression "have to forgive him." Clearly, Peter was resistant to having to forgive his brother each time his brother sinned against him, and it is often the same with us. Yeshua's parable was given as a warning to Peter, but it is also a warning to us, that our forgiveness of each other is connected to God's forgiveness of us.

We read in Colossians 3:13:

"Bear with one another; if anyone has a complaint against someone else, forgive him. Indeed, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive." (CJB)

Why should it be so difficult for us to forgive? Probably because there is a lingering part of our fallen nature that causes us to want to lash out against those who harm us. But in Romans 12:19, Paul instructs us not to do that, for he says:

"Never seek revenge, my friends; instead, leave that to God's anger; for in the Tanakh it is written, "ADONAI says, 'Vengeance is my responsibility; I will repay.'" (CJB)

Some of us may not be aware of it, but there are not one, but two kinds of forgiveness in Scripture, and our responsibility to forgive others is different for each of them. Let's consider the first one, that I will call "Personal Forgiveness." It is the kind that is commanded in Mark 11:25 (in other translations, verses 25-26):

"And when you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive your offenses." (CJB)

Notice that this Personal Forgiveness is unconditional and is to be granted, not only to brothers and sisters (in the Lord), but to all who have sinned against us and hurt us. It does not seek to judge the offender, nor does it require that the offender be repentant. And it must be given as soon as possible after the offense is committed, so that bitterness does not take root within us and do spiritual damage. This kind of forgiveness releases the matter to God for whatever justice He deems is required, and does not retain anger or a desire for personal revenge. Ephesians 4:31-32 says of it:

Get rid of all bitterness, rage, anger, violent assertiveness and slander, along with all spitefulness. Instead, be kind to each other, tenderhearted; and forgive each other, just as in the Messiah God has also forgiven you. (CJB)

Personal Forgiveness is a manifestation of godly love that we are to give – even to our enemies – for we read in Luke 6:27-32:

Nevertheless, to you who are listening, what I say is this: "Love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone hits you on one cheek, offer the other too; if someone takes your coat, let him have your shirt as well. If someone asks you for something, give it to him; if someone takes what belongs to you, don't demand it back. Treat other people as you would like them to treat you. What credit is it to you if you love only those who love you? Why, even sinners love those who love them. (CJB)

Yeshua illustrated this kind of forgiveness when, in Luke 23:34a, He beseeched His Father in heaven to forgive the Roman soldier executioners who were, even at that moment, subjecting Him to an unjust and painful death;

Yeshua said, "Father, forgive them; they don't understand what they are doing." (CJB)

Our granting Personal Forgiveness, and our not harboring bitterness against those who have sinned against us, opens the way for God to forgive us for our sins as well. In the same way, if we do not grant Personal Forgiveness, Mark 11:25¹, Matthew 6:14-15, and Luke 6:37 convey the certainty that God will not forgive us either:

For if you forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others their offenses, your heavenly Father will not forgive yours. (Matthew 6:14-15) (CJB)

Don't judge, and you won't be judged. Don't condemn, and you won't be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. (Luke 6:37) (CJB)

¹ ibid.

Now perhaps you are troubled by what seems to be the injustice of having to forgive a person for committing a sin against you if he remains unrepentant. Well, remember that I said there were two kinds of forgiveness? So let's now examine the second kind, that I call "Judicial Forgiveness,"² and that is commanded in Luke 17:3-4:

Watch yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. Also, if seven times in one day he sins against you, and seven times he comes to you and says, 'I repent,' you are to forgive him. (CJB)

Judicial forgiveness is different than Personal Forgiveness in several ways that this Scripture illustrates. First, it applies only to brothers and sisters (in the Lord). Second, whereas Personal Forgiveness must be given unconditionally, this kind of forgiveness is only granted if the offending brother repents. I call it "Judicial Forgiveness" because the one who has been sinned against is the one who judges whether the offending brother is repentant, and he must judge him repentant before forgiving him. And this kind of forgiveness is unique in another way as well, which is illustrated in John 20: 23 which states:

If you forgive someone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you hold them, they are held. (CJB)

Here you see that if one who has been sinned-against forgives his offending brother, God also forgives the brother. Conversely, if one who has been sinned against withholds forgiveness because, in his judgment, his brother is not repentant, God honors the judgment and does not forgive the brother either. That is why I call this kind of forgiveness "Judicial Forgiveness" as distinguished from the first kind which is "Personal Forgiveness." But what if the brother who is sinned against judges his brother's repentance incorrectly and does not forgive? Is the repentant brother not forgiven by God? Although Scripture does not speak to that situation, I am confident that God, who is the higher judge, will forgive, and will show the offended brother his error.

You may ask why, in explaining John 20:23, I kept referring to "brother" when the Scripture doesn't say "brother." It is because the verse involves judging, and Scripture empowers us to judge only those who are within the body of believers and

² Sometimes termed "Transactional Forgiveness."

not those who are outside; this principle is spoken of by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13:

"For what business is it of mine to judge outsiders? Isn't it those who are part of the community that you should be judging? God will judge those who are outside. Just expel the evildoer from among yourselves." (CJB)

Summarizing up to this point:

1. Personal Forgiveness must be granted to everyone, is unconditional, and clears the way for ourselves to be forgiven by God.
2. Judicial Forgiveness, on the other hand, applies only between believers, should only be granted if the offending brother is judged by the offended brother to be repentant, and clears the way for the offending brother to be forgiven by God.
3. If we are sinned against, one of the first things we must do is exercise Personal (unconditional) Forgiveness toward the offender, whether or not he is a brother. This is vital because, unless we purge ourselves of unholy attitudes, we are not in a proper frame of mind or in a spiritual condition to follow through with decisions that are subsequently required of us.

Backing up a bit, I need to add this: After granting Personal Forgiveness, the first thing we should do is decide whether or not to overlook the sin because, even when it is permissible for us to seek redress, we need not, and it is not always appropriate to do so. That we are allowed this choice is spoken of in Proverbs 19:11:

People with good sense are slow to anger, and it is their glory to overlook an offense. (CJB)

Also, Romans 12:18:

If possible, and to the extent that it depends on you, live in peace with all people.

Some offenses are easily overlooked – especially those that are unintentional, have done no great harm, and are unlikely to be repeated. Although it may seem that overlooking an offense is always the loving thing to do, it is not necessarily so. Our

decision should be based upon what is best for the offender and what is protective of others. It should not be based on our feelings. Also, if an offense is overlooked, it must really be overlooked, meaning that the offender must not be accused of it in the future, and it must not be mentioned again unless it becomes relevant because the sin is repeated.

If our decision is to not overlook the offense, our next decision depends upon whether or not the offender is a brother in the Lord. If he is not, it is unlikely that he can be appealed to with Scripture, yet he may come under conviction if confronted with universally accepted principles of conduct and morality. If he will not listen to what we have to say or is not willing to make things right, or we believe that confronting him may be dangerous, we are permitted to seek help from the secular authorities in reliance upon Romans 13:1, which states:

Everyone is to obey the governing authorities. For there is no authority that is not from God, and the existing authorities have been placed where they are by God.
(CJB)

If, however, the offender is a brother in the Lord, we are not biblically permitted to sue him in the public courts and, if justice is to be pursued, it must be through a *bet din* of the body of believers. This is clearly stated in 1 Corinthians 6:1-7, which states:

How dare one of you with a complaint against another go to court before pagan judges and not before God's people? Don't you know that God's people are going to judge the universe? If you are going to judge the universe, are you incompetent to judge these minor matters? Don't you know that we will judge angels, not to mention affairs of everyday life? So if you require judgments about matters of everyday life, why do you put them in front of men who have no standing in the Messianic Community? I say, shame on you! Can it be that there isn't one person among you wise enough to be able to settle a dispute between brothers? Instead, a brother brings a lawsuit against another brother, and that before unbelievers! Actually, if you are bringing lawsuits against each other, it is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?

So, if the offender is a brother in the Lord, we do not subject him to secular judgment; rather, our recourse for justice and reconciliation is through a three-step process that is defined in Matthew 18:15-17, the details of which we will leave for another day.

Let us end with two Scriptures that remind us of our need to forgive sins committed against us, and for all members of the body of believers to be in reconciliation and at peace with one another; first Colossians 3:12-15:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with feelings of compassion and with kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; if anyone has a complaint against someone else, forgive him. Indeed, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must forgive. Above all these, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together perfectly; and let the shalom which comes from the Messiah be your heart's decision-maker, for this is why you were called to be part of a single Body. And be thankful-

And Philippians 4:7:

Then God's shalom, passing all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with the Messiah Yeshua.