

**A BIBLICAL BASIS AND SCRIPTURAL GUIDELINES FOR
TWO-DIMENSIONAL REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS**

By

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If you have lived life long enough that you are able to read this, you have no doubt experienced both the pain of being hurt by someone and the sting of realizing that you yourself have hurt someone. Perhaps you have been deeply wounded or you have deeply wounded someone. If you are a believer, you will likely want to know what scripture has to say on how you should respond. If you are not a believer, know that God who created our relationships, foreknew that we would have trouble and has left us clear instructions to follow to find healing and reconciliation for our relationships. You are invited to follow along as we walk through God's word to discover His pathway.

A Biblical Basis for Peacemaking

Before we step on the path, there are some basic principles we need to understand about the Kingdom of God that will prepare our hearts for what He would have to say. First we need to understand that the worldwide Kingdom of God is a covenant community whose bonds are very strong. As Dr. Leah says in her book *Rediscovering the Power of Repentance and Forgiveness*, "In the ancient world, a covenant established relationship. A bilateral covenant (between two people, tribes, nations, etc.) established a tie thicker than a family bloodline. It was an unbreakable obligation between two parties ... that made "your family my family, and your enemies my enemies""¹ David Augsburger in his book *Helping People Forgive*, notes that within these communities, "Control of their emotional and spiritual life issues was not internal in "the self," but external, in "the group." Responsibility for choices and actions was lodged not primarily in "the inviolate individual" but in the solidarity of the community."² Christians today live under the New Covenant of the New Testament, which has even stronger ties than the Old Covenant. It is stronger because Christ's own shed blood has sealed it. We enter this covenant

through repentance to God and through baptism.³ When we do that, God's laws are written in our minds and on our hearts (Jer. 31:31-33). God also gives us His Holy Spirit to seal our covenant relationship and to reside in us and act as our guide (Acts 2:38). Community is big within the Kingdom of God.

How might this new concept of community look and what is our responsibility? Two passages of scripture help us get clarity. One passage is Isaiah 58. In this passage, the Israelites were crying out to God, but it seemed He was not hearing their prayers. Their relationship with Him seemed to be hampered. God responded by informing them that though they had sought to hear Him, they had neglected caring for the community surrounding them by ignoring their peacemaking responsibilities and leaving the responsibility to Him. They had done everything spiritual they could to be reconciled with Him, but had done nothing to participate in bringing peace to one another through offering healthy forgiveness and repentance within their communities. Only when they would leave their individualistic ways and actively participate in peacemaking in the community, would He hear their cries for forgiveness. God asks us be active peacemakers.

The second passage that moves our understanding toward the sense of community God intended is Jesus' parable of the lost sheep. When strife erupts within a community, everyone is affected. Some may be frightened or offended and may as a result drift away from the community and from God, particularly those who are yet young in their faith. God is asking us to actively partner with Him in watching over others in the community, by ensuring that proper procedures of forgiveness and repentance are regularly taking place within the community and by looking out for those who may have wandered already, to restore them gently and bring them back into the community.

God has set out in His word some principles that lay the groundwork for biblical forgiveness and repentance to take place. Most important for us to note is what Jesus declared to be the two greatest commands. So great are these commands, that Jesus said all the law and the prophets hang on them! Mark 12:30-31 says, “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength ... And the second, like it, is this: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There are no other commandments greater than these.” God is announcing that His greatest creation is not just mankind, but the community which began with Adam, Eve and Himself. That community is not held together by rules but by love. When we love one another, we also love our God. The key feature to note as it pertains to repentance and forgiveness is that those of us who have chosen to live in this community now live two-dimensionally and not one-dimensionally.⁴ That means that when we sin against God, we must go to Him to ask forgiveness and when we sin against one another, we must seek forgiveness from whom we have sinned-against and from our Father.⁵

Scriptural Support for Reconcilable Situations

Before we actually set foot on this pathway, we would be wise to take note of some significant features. God’s forgiveness is our template for forgiving others. As He has forgiven each of us our sins, so are we to extend forgiveness to one another. Col 3:13 says, “If anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.” God is kind, tenderhearted and gracious to us when we repent to Him of our sins. He asks us to extend the same grace to others. He forgave us while we were still sinners, so we too must not wait for others to reach perfection before we forgive. He has forgiven us all our sins, so we must not refuse to forgive any sin that we perceive is too great. He has forgiven us as a free gift, so we

must grant forgiveness as a free gift with no strings attached. To all who have repented, He has been faithful to forgive, so must we also forgive all who sin against us and repent. But we must take note that for those who choose not to repent to God, no forgiveness was granted. So must we offer no forgiveness when no repentance has been made.

Here our pathway divides into two. One path is for those who have been sinned-against and the other path is the path for those who have sinned against others. It is important to note in the community of God, that both the sinned-against and the sinner have obligations to fulfill in order to restore what has been lost and to regain trust.⁶ When we take honest stock of ourselves, we all will find that we have a mixture of both strengths and weaknesses that make us vulnerable to sinning inasmuch as being sinned-against. That is what makes us human.⁷ We therefore would prudent to familiarize ourselves with both pathways.

At the trailhead of each of these two paths, God desires to meet us before we take any steps so He can partner with us and help us prepare our hearts for the process. In Mark 11:25, God invites, “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.” If you are the one who has been sinned-against, God promises to help you prepare your heart, for your process. He will strengthen you for the task and soften your heart to offer forgiveness should they repent. He will provide you a place to leave any bitterness or right to get revenge. God also meets the sinner at this trailhead. He will also prepare your heart and give you strength to genuinely repent and offer any restitution that may be due. He will help keep you from moving into denial. He does not leave any of us alone, but on the contrary will supply all our needs when we choose to walk the path He has prepared for us.

If you are the sinned-against, biblical forgiveness acknowledges that you are owed a debt for the sin committed against you, that only you can forgive and only the sinner can pay.⁸ Scripture identifies that your first step is to approach the offender and inform them of the sin that was committed against you (Lev. 19:17). If no repentance is offered, no forgiveness should be granted. However, if repentance is offered to you, you must forgive. Luke 17:3 says, “If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.” The word of God is very clear to identify that if you choose not to forgive a repentant offender, you yourself will not receive forgiveness from your Heavenly Father. Matt. 6:14-15 says, “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” It is important to note that repentance that simply offers a defense or attempts to gloss over the infraction is not genuine and should not receive forgiveness.⁹ Genuine biblical repentance will exhibit empathy and have every intention to correct the wrong behavior. Time will be needed for this turnaround to take place and cannot be rushed. It also may require that you forgive, even many times over.¹⁰ The word requests the sinned-against to forgive as often as the sinner repents, and to see this as a normal part of our day and not beyond our call of duty. Because we have been forgiven a lifetime of sins from our Heavenly Father through repentance, it is incongruent to Him that we would not extend as much forgiveness as we have also received as articulated by Jesus in Luke 17:4, “And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, ‘I repent,’ you shall forgive him.” This is no easy task, but the faith we need has already been planted in our hearts and is capable of covering the task (Luke 17:3-10).

The word goes on to clarify the course of action for the sinned-against, should the offender refuse to acknowledge their guilt. First, you must go to the offender in private and

inform them of their sin against you. If no repentance is made, no forgiveness should be granted. Then, you must go and gather a couple of friends who are mature in the faith to accompany you to confront the offender again with their sin. If they still refuse to repent, the offender must then be called up in front of the whole church community to be openly rebuked (Matt. 18:15-20). While this may seem harsh, the heart of this process is the love the Father has for them and His loathing of the sin that has ensnared them. The attack is against the sin and not the sinner. The purpose is to flush the sin out of the life of the sinner and out of the midst of the church community and to accomplish complete relational reconciliation in the community. If no repentance of the debt is still forthcoming, you are to leave that relationship and invite the Father to take over the debt owed you. In doing so, you will leave the door open for forgiveness, should the offender repent, but ensures that you are not left to carry the unpaid debt alone. Know that God is just and true and He will be fair to mete out the penalty for the sin that was committed against you. He informs us that “Vengeance is mine.” (Rom. 12:19).

If you are the offender, biblical repentance requires you to first recognize your guilt and go to the offended to ask for forgiveness (Mark 11:25). Only the offended is able to cancel your debt of sin in the same way that we as Christians are completely reliant on Jesus to forgive the debt of sin we owe Him.¹¹ Your repentance needs to be sincere, empathetic and full of intention to do everything in your power to ensure this won't happen again. Recognize that the offended will be looking for evidence of a 180° turnaround in your behavior.¹² As the saying goes, “Sorry is as sorry does.” Realize also that you cannot rush the offended in their healing. They will need time to heal and to reestablish the trust that was broken. Once forgiveness has been granted by the offended, you are then free to go to the Father to receive necessary forgiveness from Him for your sin. If you as the offender choose not to make amends with whom you have offended, you

may find yourself being taken to court. Know that courts generally are not as kind to offenders as they are to the offended and you may find yourself being tied to their assessment of what you should to pay, even to the last cent (Matt. 5:25-26). Know that as long as you remain unreconciled with whom you have offended, your relationship with the Lord will be hampered (Matt. 16:14-15).

Scriptural Support for Irreconcilable Situations

God in His wisdom and in His word, has spoken to those who must deal with offenses against them that are of the most grievous nature. This type of sin includes injuries of war, abuse, abandonment and any others that will leave lasting scars and impairment. The Lord knows the pain you have experienced and has made generous provision for you to walk through His prescribed process for healing. Your first course of action is to go to Him and grieve the circumstances you are faced with (Mark 11:25). He invites you to express to Him the deep hurt and anger you are feeling. He then asks you to revoke your perceived right to get even with the offender, take revenge or return evil for evil, but allow Him to exact His justice on the situation.¹³ Revoking is a three stage process. First you are encouraged to remember the evil done against you and grieve your losses. Find friends who will hear your heart and validate your pain, friends who will “Mourn with those who mourn.” Identify where the blame rightly belongs. Secondly you are encouraged to reach for outside assistance in holding the offender responsible for their deeds in order that they might assume responsibility for their actions. Identify your own need for repentance in the event you have sought comfort in harmful places. Thirdly, God invites you to transfer the debt owed you to Himself so He can exact justice. You are encouraged to give up your perceived right to take justice into your own hands to balance the

scales.¹⁴ God promises in His word, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” (Rom. 12:19). Holy Spirit knows how to pray on your behalf when words escape you, and is willing to do so when you invite Him (Rom. 8:26-27). This is a tall order, but we can take comfort in 2 Cor. 12:9 where He says to us, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” He knows His own strength is more than able to help us when ours is insufficient.

May the Lord be gracious to you as you seek to walk obediently in accordance with His will for healthy relations within your community!

NOTES

¹Leah K. Coulter, *Rediscovering the Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (Norcross, GA: Ampelon Publishing, 2006), 32.

²David W. Augsburger, *Helping People Forgive* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 151.

³Leah K. Coulter, *Rediscovering the Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (Norcross, GA: Ampelon Publishing, 2006), 34.

⁴*Ibid.*, 37.

⁵*Ibid.*, 69.

⁶*Ibid.*, 99.

⁷Lewis B. Smedes, *Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 141.

⁸Leah K. Coulter, *Rediscovering the Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (Norcross, GA: Ampelon Publishing, 2006), 64.

⁹David W. Augsburger, *Helping People Forgive* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 39-41.

¹⁰Leah K. Coulter, *Rediscovering the Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (Norcross, GA: Ampelon Publishing, 2006), 71.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 88.

¹²*Ibid.*, 72.

¹³*Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 137-141.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 140.

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