

# 5 Myths About Forgiveness in the Bible

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The Bible has plenty to say about forgiveness. Where the Old Testament focuses mainly on God's forgiveness of individuals or groups, the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels also address how human beings can and should forgive *each other*.

Those teachings, however, are a precarious guide for 21st-century human relations. While Jesus mentions forgiveness several times, he never defines the term, leaving contemporary listeners to fill in the blanks. Is forgiveness something a person does, i.e., does it indicate an action, such as reconciliation or amnesty? Does forgiveness require action on the part of the offender? Is forgiveness something a person feels?

While modern conceptions of forgiveness focus mainly on its emotional dimensions, in Jesus' first-century context, forgiveness had more concrete implications. The Greek word translated as "forgive" in the New Testament, *aphiēmi*, carried a wide range of meanings, including to remit (a debt), to leave (something or someone) alone, to allow (an action), to leave, to send away, to desert or abandon, and even to divorce.

In fact, the Greek word appears 146 times in the New Testament, but it is translated in most English versions as "forgive" only 38 of those times. Considering the entire range of meanings of this word gives us some indication of what "forgiveness" might have meant to listeners in Jesus' first-century context. Most of all, forgiveness was an action rather than a feeling, and so our contemporary ideas about forgiveness as an emotional state must come from sources other than the biblical text.

Here I submit five prevailing "myths" about forgiveness that have come into Christian belief and practice. I call them myths not because they are not worthwhile guides for moral behavior, but because they do not actually have their roots in the New Testament. Separating what Jesus taught about forgiveness from what we have assumed and inferred puts a fine point on how Christians can define and practice forgiveness today.

## 1. Jesus teaches unconditional forgiveness.

Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus teach that forgiveness should be offered unconditionally. In Matthew, Jesus says that church members should forgive each other "seventy times seven times" (18:22), a number that symbolizes boundlessness. However, even though he preaches boundless forgiveness, he does not indicate whether that forgiveness has conditions. "The author of the Gospel of Luke repeats the same story, but adds a condition to forgiveness, stating that church members must forgive boundlessly "if there is repentance" (17:3).

Further, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus warns his disciples that there is a sin that will not be forgiven: "Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10). Blasphemy (Greek: *blasphemō*) means to speak against or slander. The meaning of "blasphemy against the Holy Spirit" is open to interpretation, but it is clear that there is a sin that God will not forgive under any circumstances. If Jesus teaches unconditional forgiveness, then God must be exempt from that teaching.

## 2. Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11).

Perhaps one of the best-known stories about Jesus comes from the Gospel of John, when Jesus confronts a crowd about to stone a woman who was caught in the crime of adultery. Jesus interrupts the melee,

saying, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). When no one moves to attack the woman, Jesus says to her, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again" (8:11).

This story is often cited as an example of Christian forgiveness. However, the Greek term most commonly translated as "forgive," *aphiēmi*, does not appear in this story. Jesus' refusal to condemn the woman is not the same as an offer of forgiveness. Further, Jewish wisdom teaches that only a victim may forgive an offender. Since the woman has not done anything to Jesus, he has nothing to forgive her for. His refusal to condemn her is more a lesson to the crowd about judgment than it is an expression of forgiveness.

### 3. Jesus forgives his attackers from the cross.

Luke's depiction of Jesus on the cross is often cited as the quintessential example of unconditional forgiveness. As he is being crucified, Jesus cries out, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). Readers often take this to mean that Jesus forgives those who are attacking him. However, a closer look at the syntax reveals that Jesus is not, in fact, forgiving his attackers; rather, he is praying that God might do so.

It is possible that the lack of repentance from his attackers prevents Jesus from forgiving the men directly, since he has taught his followers that repentance is a requirement for forgiveness. Also, earlier in the Gospel of Luke Jesus instructs his disciples to "pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:38). While his prayer from the cross is a perfect model of this teaching, it is not an explicit act of forgiveness.

### 4. "Turn the other cheek" refers to forgiveness.

Just after he gives the instruction to pray for one's enemies, Jesus tells his followers, "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also" (Luke 6:29; the identical teaching appears in Matthew 5:39). Some interpret this instruction -- given by Jesus as antithetical to "an eye for an eye" -- to mean that the proper response to violence or aggression is to ignore it. However, in the time of Jesus the act of turning one's cheek when slapped was not a sign of acquiescence. Turning the cheek would force the aggressor to strike with the left hand, which was seen as unclean, or the open right hand, which would signal equality. Thus, turning the other cheek would have been seen as an act of rebellion.

Further, just as the "eye for an eye" teaching served as a check for vengeance, Jesus' instruction to turn the other cheek applies to a person who is slapped and does not apply to more severe acts of violence. Nowhere does Jesus suggest that turning the other cheek is an act of forgiveness.

### 5. Forgiveness sets you free.

Theologian Lewis Smedes writes, "To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you." Much of Christian self-help literature touts the emotional and physical benefits of forgiveness. And while contemporary understandings of forgiveness may very well have positive psychological outcomes for those suffering in the aftermath of mistreatment and abuse, the idea that forgiveness is good for the forgiver, that it "sets you free," does not come from the Bible.

The closest parallel comes after the parable in which Jesus describes an unforgiving servant being condemned to prison and torture. Then he warns, "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart" (Matthew 18:35). In this case, forgiving is in the best interest of the one forgiving in order to avoid an afterlife of torture and abuse. However, the concern here is not a psychological one, but rather a concern for salvation.

Again, it may well be true that "Forgiveness sets you free." However, the idea of forgiveness as a psychological or emotional condition traces to 18th-century moral philosophy, not first-century Christian writings. Forgiveness in the time of Jesus was an action verb, and Jesus' instructions served as checks for the health of the community, both on earth and in the world to come. There is nothing in the Bible that says that forgiveness is good for the physical or mental health of the forgiver. It is anachronistic to suggest otherwise.

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