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APRIL 22, 2024

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FOCUSED ON THE WORD

# Need I Forgive Someone Who Is Unrepentant?



**F**orgiveness can be a difficult discipline to practice but is an indispensable character quality that must be continually cultivated over a lifetime. To be unforgiving is to pander to the old nature which the Scripture tells the believer to lay aside. To be unforgiving is to feed the desires of the flesh. Staff workers, friends, and family find gracious, forgiving people attractive, so cultivating this quality will actually help you.

In today's out-of-control competitive, combative environment of public elections, it is almost guaranteed that many false things will be said about you—and carrying baggage as a result is all too easy. I also struggle with false things that have been said about me in the past. We all desire to be liked and we all desire to protect our reputation, yet we live in a fallen world where jealousy and envy exist. And now with the advent of the Internet, another person can actually buy your name and turn it into a website and post whatever they want about you! How do you handle such things?

*Continued next page*

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**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDIES**

- Governors:** Fridays 9am (EST), Zoom
- Former Cabinet Members / White House Senior Staff:** Fridays 9am (EST), Zoom
- Senate Members:** Tuesdays 8am, rotating offices, hot breakfast served
- House Members:** Thursdays 8am, AG Hearing Rm., Longworth 1302, hot breakfast served

*The views expressed in each Bible Study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of any individual Bible Study sponsor.*



PUBLIC SERVANT ENDORSEMENT

## Katie Britt

U.S. Senator, Alabama



Self-proclaimed “unlikely candidate” U.S. Senator Katie Britt said God had guided her path to Congress and credited the Capitol Ministries Bible study for being an anchor for her in Washington, D.C. The junior senator from Alabama made her remarks at the CapMin International Recruiting and Training Conference in Washington, D.C., before some 100 CapMin ministry leaders and candidates from around the world. She talked about the isolation that is prominent in public life and encouraged CapMin ministry leaders saying, “What you are doing matters! Keep going! Keep encouraging others. Bring them into the fold. The Lord’s love is contagious, and we must continue to spread it and allow it to be the light that guides each of our paths.” Speaking about the CapMin Senate Bible Study she participates in she said, “I have so much hope for the future of our nation because of the men and women I sit around the table with. I see their knowledge of the Word. I see them look at things from a biblical perspective. ... I know our best days are ahead. And I believe God calls us all to do hard things.”

One public servant actually preached the opposite of forgiveness: “Don’t get mad; get even.” But failing to forgive is like storing rotten garbage; it begins to stink up your whole house! Not only is it difficult for others to hang out with someone who continually reeks of vitriol, but fostering and cultivating a desire for revenge will cloud one’s relationship with God.

Accordingly, let’s examine what the Scriptures teach about this essential biblical quality—and especially whether we need to forgive someone who is unrepentant.

Ralph Drollinger

### I. INTRODUCTION

Sorting through the following scriptural passages that speak to forgiveness will be confusing without first understanding and clarifying the difference between a position-in-Christ passage and a practice-in-Christ passage. Context indicates which of these two a particular Bible writer has in mind. What I mean by a *positional* truth in the context of this study is this: believers are forever *positionally* justified before God when by faith they place their trust in Christ and His finished work on the Cross on their behalf. The permanency of Christ’s forgiveness is always assured. The believer is said to be *sealed in Him*, and nothing *will be able to separate us from the love of God* (Ephesians 1:13; Romans 8:38–39). Accordingly, positionally before God is the person who has placed his trust in Christ.

But in addition to *positional* truth, the Author of Scripture, God Himself,

speaks of *practice* truths. For example, in the book of Ephesians, the first three chapters address *positional* truths such as the one already mentioned. Then, at the beginning of chapter 4, the Apostle Paul segues into speaking about *practice* truths, and what the implications are in the life of the believer given the *positional* truths previously examined.

To the subject of this Bible study, the point is this: should not those who are *positionally* forgiven and sealed in Christ *practice* forgiveness with others? Bottom line, to forgive others is to be Christlike! To do otherwise reveals a disconnect between a person’s beliefs and his actions. If I have been *positionally* forgiven by God, should I not *practice* forgiving others? This is a simple but profound point to make at the front end of such a study. In summary of the Introduction, the word *forgiveness* is used in both a *positional* and a *practical* sense throughout the Bible. This distinction will greatly aid our understanding of what follows.



## II. THE MANDATE TO FORGIVE

### A. THE EXAMPLE OF THE LIFE OF JESUS CHRIST

The crucifixion of Christ on the cross was an unmatched illustration of ultimate injustice. The world will never see a greater contradiction between the life Jesus lived and the gruesome penalty He received. Accordingly, Jesus set a profound example for us relative to His gracious response to His own flagrant mistreatment. Notice in this regard what is recorded in Luke 23:34:

*But Jesus was saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*

Jesus uttered these words in the midst of being laughed at and mocked! Such a response shows not only His divine grace and enablement but His boundless compassion and characteristic forgiveness. The point is this:

**Christ is our role model for a forgiving spirit—no matter what injustice we may have suffered.**

To be Christlike is to respond to injustice with personal concern toward the perpetrator. It is to *“love your enemies”* (Matthew 5:44). It is to *regard one another as more important than yourselves* (Philippians 2:3). Only the indwelling Holy Spirit can enable and achieve such uncharacteristic, counterintuitive personal responses! Each of us is still in possession of a sin nature that desires to feed on revenge. Herein is the ultimate, divine, and powerfully profound example of what it means to be ultimately forgiving.

### B. FURTHER ELABORATION FROM THE LIFE OF JESUS

In Mark 11:25 Jesus elaborates on the mandate to forgive. The truth of this passage is easy to see. Failing to possess a forgiving spirit toward others will adversely affect a believer’s relationship with God.

*“Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father who is in heaven will also forgive you your transgressions.”*

This passage is not suggesting that the believer’s position in Christ is in jeopardy for failing to forgive another person. Rather, what this passage is teaching is this:

**In your day-to-day life, clinging to contention will cloud your communion with Christ.**

Jesus is saying that the benefit of forgiving someone is not only a restored relationship with that person but also a continued closeness to God. In a similar passage related to practice (versus position) 1 John 1:9 states, *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* This passage, in its context, is also related to the day-to-day living of the believer. The verse is not suggesting that a person’s failure to confess his sins after being saved will lead to his loss of salvation; rather, the Apostle John is teaching us that such a failure affects our communion with Christ.

Both Mark 11:25 and 1 John 1:9 are expressing the same realities related to the ongoing daily walk or practice of the believer. Both forgiving others and confessing our sins after being saved will affect our relationship both with God and our

VERSE OF THE WEEK



**Luke 23:34**

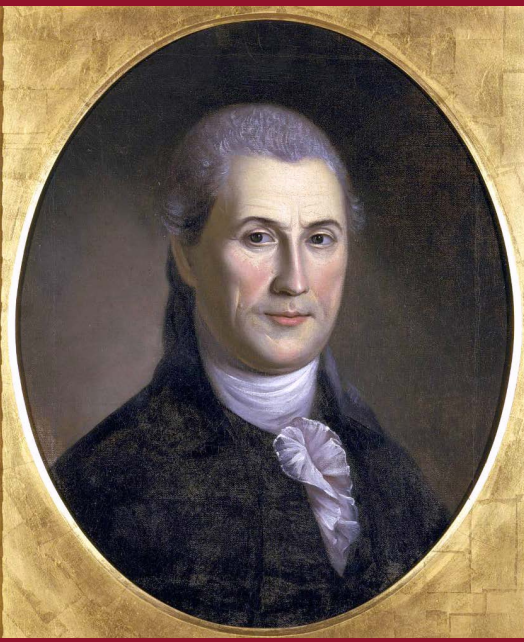
*But Jesus was saying, “Father forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.”*



Jesus uttered these words in the midst of being laughed at and mocked! Such a response shows not only His divine grace and enablement, but His boundless compassion and characteristic forgiveness. Christ is our role model for a forgiving spirit.



Samuel Huntington



“It becomes a people publicly to acknowledge the over-ruling hand of Divine Providence and their dependence upon the Supreme Being as their Creator and Merciful Preserver ... and with becoming humility and sincere repentance to supplicate the pardon that we may obtain forgiveness through the merits and mediation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.”

— Samuel Huntington, signer of the Declaration of Independence, president of Congress, judge, governor of Connecticut.

Samuel Huntington, *A Proclamation for a Day of Fasting, Prayer and Humiliation*, March 9, 1791.

fellow man. Such is an important elaboration regarding God’s mandate to be a forgiving individual. (If either of these aforementioned passages were to be interpreted to mean that a believer could lose his salvation, it would contradict the clear pronouncements of Ephesians 1:13 and Romans 8:38–39.)

### C. YOUR ABILITY AND POWER TO FORGIVE

Rather than continuing to harbor resentment and seeking “a pound of flesh” or personal revenge, notice the intent of Jesus’ interaction with Peter in Matthew 18:21–22:

*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.”*

It’s easy to see what Peter was angling for here; he wanted to know at what point he could retaliate! Jesus responds by revealing the nature and an attribute of God Himself, underscoring the godly principle and indispensable character quality of ongoing, attitudinal personal forgiveness.

Believers, via the indwelling and empowering Holy Spirit, you are already in possession of an unending spirit of graciousness and the ability to personally forgive others! When you came to Christ, the gracious Holy Spirit took up residency in your heart; and He is called *the Helper* (cf. John 14:16; 16:7). Are you living in accordance with your position in Christ? When you retaliate, are you not quenching the Holy Spirit’s very nature that He wants to exude through you as His ambassador? Therefore, for any believer to posture “I am not a very forgiving person,” is theologically incongruous! Oh, yes, you are! Quite simply, you

are *not* choosing to live according to your new nature in Christ! Instead, you are choosing to pander to your old fleshly nature that wants to be fed in and by your disobedience to God’s truths.

### III. THE MECHANISMS TO ACHIEVE JUSTICE

The first point in this study makes it clear that believers should model Christ’s attribute of forgiveness. The believer is mandated, i.e., commanded, to personally forgive others.

However, the question many believers wrestle with is this: do I need to forgive someone who is not repentant? That too is the question Peter was getting at in the above passage. Certainly, Jesus’ answer mandated unending personal forgiveness, but therein He does not address a person’s liberty to seek institutional justice (if need be) as is revealed elsewhere in Scripture (cf. Romans 13:4). While Scripture leaves no room for personal retaliation, it does give license to and for seeking institutional justice. What follows will help clarify this distinction.

#### A. BY THE USE OF GOVERNMENT

In considering the answer to the question “Need I Forgive Someone Who is Unrepentant?” we must turn our attention to better understanding God’s purposes and reasons for why He instituted civil government. But note first Romans 12:18 and 19:

*If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord.*

The first sentence of this Pauline passage underscores the same idea developed in



the first point, i.e., believers are to be characteristically forgiving *in a personal sense*. But notice the second portion of this passage. Likened to Jesus in Matthew 18:21–22 (mentioned in the first part of this Bible study), here in Romans 12, Paul does not eliminate the possibility of *vengeance* (i.e., “justification relative to a wrong committed”). In fact, he specifies how it is to be accomplished:

**God is to do the avenging—  
not the individual  
who was violated.**

How does God achieve His vengeance? Notice Romans 13:4 several verses later in the context of this passage, keeping in mind that the chapter divisions in the Bible are not inspired. They were added by man years later, and therefore, do not necessarily indicate a different subject or thought. Paul states here that the institution of government is God’s *avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil* (Romans 13:4). Something huge is being added here relative to our understanding of forgiveness.

Yes, the believer is mandated to be forever characteristically forgiving and not to seek after his or her own personal vindication of any wrong suffered. Such, rather, is the duty of civil government. In this stream of thought God says, **“I WILL RE-PAY.”** How does God Himself repay? Via His use of His ordained personal surrogate: civil government. People can count on God’s promise to do that—that is, if the offended party is willing to put the matter into His hands and be patient. Here then is a balancing principle relative to personal forgiveness:

**God intends for individuals  
to forgive injustices, but if  
need be, to adjudicate  
them via civil government.**

As a public servant, you are well aware of your responsibility to maintain one of the major God-mandated responsibilities of government: to be about providing “justice for all” in a fallen world (as the American Pledge of Allegiance aptly states). Civil government is to be manifestly representational of God’s attribute of justice. In that God is both characteristically forgiving and characteristically just at the same time, He therefore expects the same from His institution and those who manage it! Herein then, the book of Romans not only provides great doctrine, but beautiful, practical theology, instructing an injured individual how to achieve both personal forgiveness and institutional justice—all within several verses of one another (12:18 to 13:4)!

To teach that believers should forgive and forget and not to seek justice is to teach a half-truth from Scripture. And such serves to discount God’s purpose for civil government, which is to manifest His attribute of justice (cf. 1 Peter 2:13–14; Romans 13:1–5).

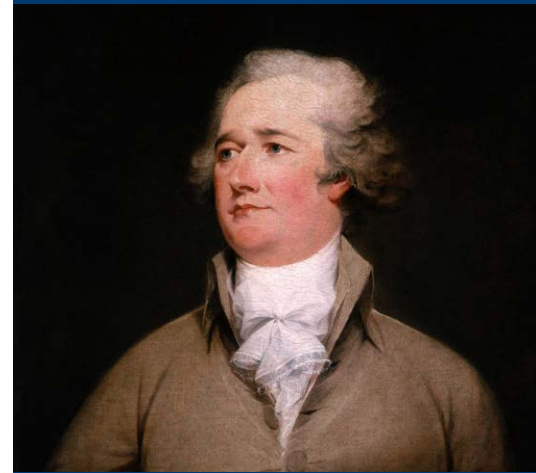
**B. BY THE ATTITUDE  
OF AN INDIVIDUAL**

This God-given blueprint for dealing with someone who has in some way harmed another is further elaborated on in Romans 12:20:

**“BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.”**

Paul is most likely referring to an ancient Egyptian custom wherein those who desired to display their contrition in public would carry a pan of burning coals atop their head, outwardly representing the pain of their guilt and shame. Studying this passage reveals a second form of recompense for wrong. In addition to a

Alexander Hamilton



In the 24 hours that he lived after his duel with Aaron Burr, Alexander Hamilton called for two ministers, the Rev. J. M. Mason and the Rev. Benjamin Moore, to pray with him and administer Communion to him. Each minister reported what transpired. The Rev. Mason quoted Hamilton as saying this:

**“With the utmost sincerity of heart, I can answer those questions in the affirmative—I have no ill will against Col. Burr. I met him with a fixed resolution to do him no harm—I forgive all that happened.”**

— Alexander Hamilton, American Revolutionary War General, signer of the Constitution, author of *The Federalist Papers*, Secretary of the Treasury.

John M. Mason, *A Collection of the Facts and Documents Relative to the Death of Major General Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Hopkins and Seymour, 1804), 48–50.





John Hancock



“[T]hat with true contrition of heart we may confess our sins, resolve to forsake them, and implore the Divine forgiveness, through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ, our Savior. ... And finally to overrule all the commotions in the world to the spreading the true religion of our Lord Jesus Christ in its purity and power among all the people of the earth.”

— John Hancock, signer of the Declaration of Independence, president of Congress, American Revolutionary War general, governor of Massachusetts.

John Hancock, Proclamation for Day of Public Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, March 4, 1793.

## Need I Forgive Someone Who Is Unrepentant?

harmful party’s appealing to civil governing authorities in order to obtain justice, this passage teaches that one’s enactment of personal forgiveness not only benefits the forgiver but additionally serves to shame the offender.

In the above passage of Romans 12:20, Paul is quoting this idea of heaping shame and guilt on someone via enacting public forgiveness from Proverbs 25:21–22. There in the book of Proverbs, King Solomon explicitly states similarly the same principle to his son Rehoboam as Paul is expressing to the believers in the Church at Rome. But in that passage the King states something outwardly that in Romans Paul only implies: *And the LORD will reward you* (Proverbs 25:22).

This verse underscores God’s means of achieving repentance and reconciliation in and with another via the use of shaming in public. Solomon says that *the LORD will reward* those who invoke shame on an offender in this way. But keep in mind that the way a person shames another and obtains God’s favor is via his personal choice to forgive the offender! Here then are two great incentives to mentally incorporate as you battle against your old sin nature that so wants to harbor hurt and revel in retaliation.

### C. COMBINING BOTH MECHANISMS

In Matthew 18:23–33 Jesus tells a parable (known as “The Parable of the King”) that serves to illustrate the tension between using the tools of personal forgiveness and the subsequent, if necessary, deployment of institutional authority in order to achieve justice with an unrepentant party. In this parable a king forgives a servant who had wronged him and owed him much; however, the forgiven servant did not similarly forgive a fellow

servant who had wronged him and owed him much. A pertinent portion of the parable follows:

*“But that [forgiven] slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ ... Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do that same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart”* (vv. 28, 32–35).

The overarching idea of this parable is that if God has forgiven you (positional truth), you should be willing to forgive others (practicing truth). But it also serves to better understand the other point under study: the king possessed both a forgiving attitude (in the first part of the parable) and (in the latter part of the parable) a willingness to utilize institutional authority, if necessary, in order to achieve justice.

The king’s forgiving spirit is underscored by verse 32: *‘I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me.’* The inference is that the king initially perceived (incorrectly) the slave to be contrite over his sin and seeking reconciliation, so he forgave him. But in reality, the slave turned out to be everything but! At the outset had the king known the slave’s heart to be hard and recalcitrant relative to the wrongs he had committed (he was of such poor character that he was actually choking the fellow slave), he would have probably done sooner what he ended-up doing later. In reality, the slave proved



to be a deceitful and brutal individual.

Once the slave's devious, manipulative and hurtful ways were established, the king employed institutional means to bring about justice (cf. v. 34). The forgiving king did not shirk from employing legal means to achieve reconciliation. The same wisdom and acumen should characterize every mature believer—and serve to inform him regarding how to properly deal with unrepentant individuals. Among other lessons, Jesus is teaching via this parable that

**There is a tension between being personally forgiving and yet legally employing.**

The Parable of the King is both descriptive and illustrative of these tandem-and-in-tension truths taught in Scripture. On the one hand is the instruction of Ephesians 4:32 and, on the other hand, Romans 13:4:

*Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you* (Ephesians 4:32).

*But if you do what is evil be afraid; for it [civil government] does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil* (Romans 13:4).

Every believer is to be characterized by *kindness* and *tenderheartedness*; these attitudes are synonymous with a forgiving spirit (cf. Colossians 3:12–13). But at the same time the believer understands that “Government does not bear the sword for no reason” (my paraphrase). God ordained civil government for a reason: to manifest God's justice (albeit not perfectly) in a fallen world.

Unfortunately, some “spiritualize” away this God-given purpose for civil government, believing that God would have them only forgive and try to forget—versus using His ordained means, i.e., institutional authority, in order to also achieve justice. Don't settle for less than what God has provided in terms of remedying a wrong.

**Passivity is not to be equated with a higher level of spirituality no more so than should forgiveness eclipse justice.**

Sometimes passivity and forgiveness are spiritualized concealments for the lack of courage to fight for justice.

#### **D. BY THE USE OF A GODLY ARBITRATOR**

In 1 Corinthians 6:1–8 Paul identifies another additional means to seek justice, specifically as it relates to believers who disagree over smaller matters of a civil (versus criminal) nature, i.e., believers should always attempt to solve their minor differences (cf. v. 2) without civil government/secular courts.

#### **E. SUMMARY REGARDING THE MECHANISMS TO ACHIEVE JUSTICE**

Does God expect you to forgive someone who is unrepentant? Yes. A person should not hold internal grudges—even if the offending party has not attempted to apologize or make things right. Internally, we must let things go—no matter what the attitude or response of an offender is. As stated in the first point, the believer is to be characterized by unending personal forgiveness; he or she is mandated to forgive. But on the other hand, a person's forgiveness does not propitiate for another's injustice. And

for that matter, God has provided and empowered a mechanism He has called into existence in a fallen world. He calls this mechanism civil government, and He intends for it to adjudicate and recompense wrongful actions.

**There need always be requisite satisfaction of violated justice.**

On the cross Christ forgave and simultaneously satisfied our violation of His standards, justifying the believer's standing, his vertical relationship with God. But in the horizontal world of personal relationships, well, that often takes two steps to accomplish: personal forgiveness and then payment later. Accordingly, the wronged one needs to personally forgive while wisely seeking measured remedies for injustice. Likened to Christ's work on the cross, the achievement in a horizontal sense of personal forgiveness and justification both serve to manifest God's character and attributes in our world. While some offending parties need not the voice of institutional authority in order to gain the sensitivity of righting a wrong, others do. In fact, Jesus spoke to this in Matthew 5:25–26:

*“Make friends quickly with your opponent at law while you are with him on the way, so that your opponent may not hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Truly I say to you, you will not come out of there until you have paid up the last cent.”*

The mere threat of a person's use of institutional authority in order to seek justice often serves to bring about reconciliation apart from civil government involvement. God desires that wrongdoers fear the authority of civil



government (so as a public servant, make sure that they do!) and what it can do to them if they practice or refuse to reconcile a wrongdoing. It goes without saying that a strong judicial system enacted and maintained by civil governing authorities is an irreplaceable component to achieving both justice and orderly conduct in a fallen world.

illustrate the need for huge spiritual maturity and the need for the believer to continue to grow in forgiveness, which is a rigorous discipline he must choose in order to become more Christlike in a fallen world.

## V. CONCLUSION

What motivates and enables believers' growth in forgiveness is this: we possess an internal sense of having been blessed by God (cf. Proverbs 25:21–22) if for no reason other than knowing we have been called by God and set apart by Him to achieve His holy purposes in a fallen world.

Let the security and profundity of this calling endow you with the internal fortitude to respond in Christlikeness in the face of injustice. Your position in Christ provides you with the means to forgive and seek reconciliation with even your worst enemies. Who might the Holy Spirit desire for you to forgive and seek justice with?

## IV. THE MEANS OF FORGIVENESS

One of God's attributes is that He loves even His enemies. This universal love is displayed in His indiscriminate blessing bestowed on all of mankind. Theologically, this love is referred to as *common grace*. It then follows that for believers to reflect more and more the attributes of God in a fallen world, we must also love our enemies. Notice this discipline evident by the command in Matthew 5:44:

*“But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*

Joseph undoubtedly displayed this discipline as recorded in Genesis 45:5–11 wherein he welcomes back his betraying brothers. Both Matthew and Genesis il-



*Making Disciples  
of Jesus Christ  
in the Political Arena  
Throughout the World*



Capitol Ministries provides Bible studies, evangelism, and discipleship to political leaders. Founded in 1996, Capitol Ministries has started ongoing ministries in more than forty U.S. state Capitols and dozens of foreign federal Capitols.

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