

DOES MATTHEW 6:14 TEACH THAT WE MUST FORGIVE UNCONDITIONALLY?

Before examining this verse or any given topic in the Bible, one should always use the basic fundamentals of Biblical interpretation. We need to take all the parts to make the whole. Consider the following illustration. When you open a puzzle and examine one of the pieces you only get part of the picture. If you see a dog on that puzzle piece, you can know there is a dog in the picture. However, you will never learn what the complete picture is until you put all the pieces together. This same concept is true when it comes to the Bible. We must take all the verses from the Bible and put them together so the complete picture can be seen. A classical example of this can be observed in the story of Jesus' arrest. Matthew and Mark both teach that one of those with Jesus drew his sword and struck off the ear of the high priest's servant (Mt. 26:51; Mk. 14:47). From this one piece of the puzzle we have no idea who struck the servant, which ear was cut off or what the servant's name was. The next piece of the puzzle is found in Luke. He informs us the high priest's servant's right ear was cut and that Jesus healed it (Lk. 22:50). Now, John will make our picture complete. John teaches us Simon Peter was the one who cut off the high priest's servant's right ear and we find out his name was Malchus (Jn.18:10). It took all these parts to make the whole picture. Many people fail to follow this rule.

Instead, they take one or two verses and base their entire belief system on them. This is why there is so much confusion in the religious world today. Another important thing to remember is that if we love God, we will obey His commandments (1 Jn. 5:3; Jn. 14:15) and put His Word above our personal feelings and compassion. With the above thoughts in mind, let us now examine the verse in question.

Matthew 6:14 "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15 "But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." See also Mark 11:25

Matthew and Mark both teach the same thing just as they did in our example earlier. Do these verses teach that God will not forgive our sins unless we forgive other people unconditionally whether they repent or don't repent? It is important to remember this is just one piece of the puzzle. If all we had were these two verses, then the answer to the question would be yes. We do not find any specifics within these verses other than a blanket statement to forgive people of their trespasses. However, just like our earlier example, Luke provides us with another piece of the puzzle.

Luke 17:3 "Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him." 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."

Luke provides us with more information that allows us to see more of the complete picture. He tells us that if a brother sins against you and he repents, we must forgive him. From this, we can determine the correct answer to our question is no. With our new piece of the puzzle, we now know that Matthew is saying this: if you forgive men their trespasses who have repented, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. However, if you do not forgive men their trespasses who have repented, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. God does not require us to forgive people who do not repent. He only requires us to forgive those who repent. The Bible teaches us that we are to forgive people just like God forgives us (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). God loves us unconditionally, but He does not forgive unconditionally (Lk. 13:3; Rev. 2:5, 2:22; Acts 17:30). Our sins were not forgiven as non-Christians until we believed Jesus was the Son of God, repented, confessed Jesus as our Lord and were baptized into Christ for the remission of our sins. Once we become a child of God, we want to be forgiven of our sins. We must repent and confess our sins to God (1 Jn. 1:9).

Before we go any further I want to define what **forgiveness** and **forgiving spirit** means.

Forgiveness means to proclaim one blameless and to forget the offense they committed against you. When we pray to God for the forgiveness of our sins, He doesn't just forgive them, He remembers them no more (Heb. 8:12). In a similar way, if I forgive a person who has sinned against me, I mark them blameless and our relationship will be reconciled. We will now be in full fellowship with each other.

Forgiving Spirit means you have a forgiving attitude and will be ready and willing to forgive those that repent. God has a forgiving spirit. He loves people unconditionally and He does not hold a grudge. He is ready and willing to forgive people when they repent. Christians are to have this same love for one another. The Bible teaches us to love our enemies, bless those that curse us, do good to those who hate us, and pray for those who spitefully use us and persecute us (Mat. 5:44). Peter teaches us not to render evil for evil (1 Pet. 3:8-9). If someone sins against us, we cannot hold a grudge against them. We cannot harbor evil thoughts against them or treat them badly, but we should not proclaim forgiveness to those who have not repented.

Please note the following reasons we shouldn't proclaim forgiveness to someone who has not repented:

1. God doesn't forgive unrepented sin and therefore would not require His children to do something He is unwilling to do.

2. If we forgive them, we mark them blameless and we do away with our responsibilities as Christians. Gal. 6:1 and James 5:19 teach us that we must try to restore those that have been overtaken by sin. Matthew 18:15-17 specifically tells us what we are to do when our brother sins against us.

Mat. 18:15 "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' 17 "And if he refuses to hear them, tell *it* to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."

None of these steps would be necessary if we simply forgive someone unconditionally. The Bible makes it clear that if someone is unwilling to repent after this procedure has been carried out, they are to be like a heathen and a tax collector to us. We are to withdraw (2 Thes. 3:6), avoid, (Rom. 16:17), not eat with, (1 Cor. 5:11) or keep company with such a person (2 Thes. 3:14). Paul did this with Hymenaeus and Alexander in hopes that they would come to their senses and repent for their wrong doings (1 Tim. 1:20). This procedure is not done out of

anger or out of hate. Instead, it is done out of love. Sometimes people have to experience what they are missing so they might come to their senses and realize they are living in sin. 2 Thessalonians 3:15 tells us not to count them as an enemy, but to admonish or warn them as a brother. So, don't give up hope for them and be sure to encourage them to repent. Due to our personal compassion, sometimes we might think it's acceptable to eat with this person or to allow them to worship with us in their unrepentant state. However, based on the verses we have examined, is it acceptable to do this? This is like telling your children they can't watch TV today because of their behavior and then one hour later allowing them to watch TV. If you don't stand on the Word of God and the discipline He has taught us to use in His Word, do you think these people who have not repented will ever learn there are consequences to their sin? If we continue to forgive people who don't repent it will encourage them to sin even more. In doing this, we do more harm than good.

In conclusion, I want you to realize that I take my responsibility as a teacher of the Word of God seriously. James 3:1 tells us teachers will receive a stricter judgment. I have done my best to teach what the Word of God says about this topic. Even though most of the Bible talks about those in the body, we can still apply some of what we have learned to non-Christians as well. If they repent, we should forgive them. We should pray for them so they might come

to a knowledge of the truth about God. We should also pray for those brothers and sisters who have sinned against us that they might repent. Finally, when I am talking about someone who has sinned against you, I mean that they have committed a Biblical sin. I am not talking about a misunderstanding or hurt feelings because of a poor choice of words. This type of offense should be overlooked by brotherly love. I hope this article has been helpful. Let us be like the Bereans and search the scriptures daily to see if what I have presented is so (Acts 17:11).

If you have questions or comments send them to lgchurchofchrist@cablone.net.

**Should we
forgive
everyone
unconditionally?**

By Cougan Collins