

Two different approaches to covering sin***The importance of covering sin***

“Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

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

“bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you” (Colossians 3:13).

“Hatred stirs up strife, But love covers all transgressions” (Proverbs 10:12).

“A fool’s anger is known at once, But a prudent man conceals dishonor” (Proverbs 12:16).

“A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, But the slow to anger calms a dispute” (Proverbs 15:18).

“He who conceals a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates intimate friends” (Proverbs 17:9).

“A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger, And it is his glory to overlook a transgression” (Proverbs 19:11).

“Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man, But any fool will quarrel” (Proverbs 20:3).

1. Cover sin by overlooking the sin

“Since God does not deal harshly with us every time we sin [cf. Psalm 103:8–10], we should be willing to treat others in a similar fashion. While this does not mean that we must overlook all sins, it does require that we make every effort to overlook inconsequential wrongdoing. This should take place under two conditions. First, the offense should not have created a wall between you and the other person or caused you to feel differently toward him or her for more than a short period of time. Second, the offense should not be doing serious harm to God’s reputation, to others, or to the offender” (Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 73).

Unconditional forgiveness “is a choice made by the offended party to set aside the other person’s transgression and not permit the offense to cause a breach in the relationship or fester in bitterness” (MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 122).

“Unless an offense *requires* confrontation, unconditional, unilateral forgiveness should cover the transgression” (MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 123).

As much as possible, we should “simply learn to overlook a multitude of offenses against ourselves, recognizing that we are all sinners and that we must gratefully thank others for covering our sins as well” (Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, 34).

We must imitate God.

“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you and gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma” (Ephesians 5:1).

“The Lord is compassionate and gracious, Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not always strive [with us], Nor will He keep [His anger] forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103:8–10).

We must tend toward forbearance.

“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1–3).

“Love ... is not easily angered” (1 Corinthians 13:5).

“For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting [Himself] to Him who judges righteously” (1 Peter 2:21–23).

““You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you” (Matthew 5:38–40).

“If you are the *only* injured party, even if the offense was public and flagrant, you may choose to forgive unilaterally” (MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 124).

““But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on [the] evil and [the] good, and sends rain on [the] righteous and [the] unrighteous” (Matthew 5:44–45).

Joseph forgave his brothers (Genesis 50:20).

David forgave Shimei (2 Samuel 16:10–12; 19:18–23). David later instructed Solomon (1 Kings 2:9) to exercise justice toward Shimei because of his blasphemy against God (cf. 2 Samuel 16:7–8).

Stephen forgave his killers and asked God to forgive them (Acts 7:60). But Saul wasn’t forgiven by God until he repented and believed in Jesus (Acts 8:1; 1 Timothy 1:12–16).

What it means to overlook

“If you decide to overlook an offense, you should not simply file it away in your memory for later use against the other person. Instead, you need to forgive the offense in a biblical way: making a commitment not to dwell on it or use it against the other person in the future. ... If you cannot overlook the offense this way, or if overlooking it would not be biblically appropriate, talk to the other person about it in a loving and constructive manner” (Sande, *The Peacemaker*, 73).

2. Cover sin by confronting the sin

“Any offense, no matter what its nature, may create an unreconciled condition, depending on how the offended party responds to the offense. The same offense may or may not result in an unreconciled condition, depending on many changeable and unpredictable factors, such as the predisposition of the one offended, his past experiences, the number of times it has been repeated, how he interprets it, and so on” (Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, 34–35).

“If you observe a serious offense that is a sin against someone other than you, confront the offender” (MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 128).

““You shall not pervert the justice [due] to your needy [brother] in his dispute” (Exodus 23:6; cf. Isaiah 59:15–16; Lam. 3:35–36).

“Thus says the Lord, “Do justice and righteousness, and deliver the one who has been robbed from the power of [his] oppressor. Also do not mistreat [or] do violence to the stranger, the orphan, or the widow; and do not shed innocent blood in this place”” (Jeremiah 22:3).

The exception would be if the offended person chooses to overlook the offense (cf. 2 Samuel 16:9–10).

But be careful: “[Like] one who takes a dog by the ears Is he who passes by [and] meddles with strife not belonging to him” (Proverbs 26:17).

“When ignoring an offense might hurt the offender, confrontation is required” (MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 129).

“Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; [each one] looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1–2).

“When a sin is scandalous or otherwise potentially damaging to the body of Christ, confrontation is essential” (MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 130).

“See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled” (Hebrews 12:15).

“It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife. You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst” (1 Corinthians 5:1–2).

“Any time an offense results in a broken relationship, formal forgiveness is an essential step toward reconciliation” (MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 132).

“Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him” (Luke 17:3).

“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering” (Matthew 5:23–24).

The goal of forgiveness: reconciliation

Forgiveness culminates in reconciliation.

“A brother offended [is harder to be won] than a strong city, And contentions are like the bars of a citadel” (Proverbs 18:19).

“If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother” (Matthew 18:15).

“Therefore if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering. Make friends quickly with your opponent at law...” (Matthew 5:23–25a).

Helps toward reconciliation

“Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which [was inflicted] by the majority, so that on the contrary you should rather **forgive** and **comfort** [him], otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. Wherefore I urge you to **reaffirm** [your] **love** for him” (2 Corinthians 2:6–8).

Clarifying thoughts

“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, [he is] a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all [these] things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not

counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:17–19).

“If you have committed the offense, it is sinful not to make it right. If you are the offended party, you also have a duty to seek reconciliation—to try to win your brother. There is never any excuse for a Christian on either side of a broken relationship to refuse to pursue reconciliation. The only instance where such a conflict should remain unresolved is if all the steps of discipline in Matthew 18 have been exhausted and the guilt party still refuses to repent.

“But even then, you are to hold no bitterness in your heart, and you are to love that offender as you love your enemies, with a longing for their spiritual well-being and restoration to fellowship. ‘Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother’ (2 Thess. 3:15). Though no formal transaction of forgiveness is possible, the heart holds no ill will, and reconciliation remains the goal” (MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 133).

“Forgiveness is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end—a new and better relationship with those from whom we have become estranged because of some altercation. Not only does God want forgiveness to occur speedily, but His main interest is in the new relationship which forgiveness always ought to introduce. Forgiveness is clearing the rubble of the past so that something fresh and fine may be built in its place” (Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, 68–69).

“[R]estoration is not something that may be taken lightly or done casually. One must consciously work at it. It will take time, creativity, energy, perhaps even money” (Adams, *From Forgiven to Forgiving*, 73).

Summary

“The emphasis [of Scripture which speaks of our forgiveness of others] is on forgiving freely, generously, willingly, eagerly, speedily—and from the heart. The attitude of the forgiver is where the focus of Scripture lies, not the terms of forgiveness” (MacArthur, *Forgiveness*, 118–119).

Forgiveness ought to characterize our lives.

It is possible for us to get so wrapped up in the intricacies of forgiveness that we miss the larger issue: Am I a forgiving person?

I must promise and fulfill: “Good thought, Hurt you Not, Gossip Never, Friends Forever” (cf. Sande, *The Peacemaker*).

Do I have a forgiving spirit toward those who have not (and may never) ask my forgiveness?

In what ways am I harboring bitterness or even plotting revenge?

Suggested reading

Adams, Jay E. *From Forgiven to Forgiving: Learning to Forgive One Another God’s Way*. Amityville, NH: Calvary Press, 1994.

MacArthur, John F. *The Freedom and Power of Forgiveness*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998.

Sande, Ken. *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*. Second Edition. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997.