



THE
MENTORING
PROJECT

FORGIVENESS



GARRETT KELL

FORGIVENESS



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INTRODUCTION: FORGIVENESS

An adjunct professor from Rwanda gave a guest lecture during my second year of seminary. His meek demeanor and thunderous authority uniquely captivated our attention as he spoke on his topic for the day: forgiveness.

He began his lesson by telling us about a banquet unlike one he had ever attended. Smells of freshly cooked dishes mingled with the sound of unexpected laughter. There were tears and testimonies and spontaneous songs of joy. But what made the banquet so remarkable was *who* was in attendance and *why* they had gathered.

Years before, the war between Hutu and Tutsi tribes had reached its peak in Rwanda. Horrific acts of war were commonplace in those days. Our professor's face bore scars from a Hutu machete that had carved lines on his cheeks in mockery after it had been used to slay several of his family members.

His recounting of unspeakable evils seemed to justify vengeance and hatred. Yet, as he spoke, it was evident that something had eclipsed the hatred in his heart. He was not filled with fury, but forgiveness. Our guest testified that the good news that God forgave sinners through the death and resurrection of Jesus had spread like wildfire in his village, and as people received forgiveness from God, they extended it to one another — him included.

The banquet was special because around the table sat both Hutus and Tutsis. Some had scars like his, some were missing limbs, and all were missing loved ones. They had formerly sought to exterminate one another. Yet that night, they held hands to pray, broke bread to feast, and sang together of Jesus' amazing, forgiving, reconciling, healing grace.

While you may not need to forgive someone for acts of genocide, none of

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us escape the need to be forgiven and to extend forgiveness. Friends sin against friends — and need forgiveness. Parents sin against children and children sin against parents — and need forgiveness. Spouses sin against each other, neighbors sin against each other, strangers sin against each other — and we need forgiveness.

Our greatest need for forgiveness, however, is because of our sin against God. We have all sinned against him in unique, personal ways and deserve his just judgment (Rom. 3:23, 6:23). But God made a way for his justice to be satisfied and forgiveness to be extended. His Son Jesus came among us, lived a life without sin, died on a cross to receive the judgment we deserve, and then rose from the grave. His work declares that God is both just and the justifier of those who trust in Jesus (Rom. 3:26). Those who have been forgiven much by God are to be marked by forgiving others.

This field guide serves as an introduction to the concept of biblical forgiveness. It will not answer all your questions, but I trust it will aid you and those who are journeying with you as you seek to embody the gospel life Jesus grants to those who know him.

1

WHAT AND WHY?

Jessica sat across the table from her friend Kaitlin. Her heart was in knots because she knew she needed to tell her that she'd lied. She had been afraid of what Kaitlin might think if she knew the truth, so she withheld information and deceived her friend. Kaitlin was going to be blindsided and probably (justifiably) angry. Looking her friend in the eye, Jessica said, "I need to ask you to forgive me. I lied to you, and I am very sorry."

Sadly, this sort of conversation is necessary in a fallen world. But what exactly is Jessica asking Kaitlin to do? If both are Christians, what is expected of them? How should Kaitlin respond? Is forgiveness optional? Is it essential? Does forgiving mean that everything will be forgotten and their friendship will return to how it was? Understanding forgiveness is tricky but fundamental for followers of Jesus.

What Is Forgiveness?

The Old and New Testaments use at least six words to describe aspects of forgiveness. Some words only refer to God forgiving sinners, while others also capture what people do in extending forgiveness to fellow sinners. At the heart of all these words is the concept of canceling debt.

For our purposes, we'll define forgiveness this way: *Forgiveness is the gracious canceling of debt amassed by sin and choosing to relate to that person as forgiven.*

Forgiving does not mean we must forget the grievous actions committed against us.

Forgiving is not the same as reconciling and restoring a broken relationship.

Forgiving does not necessarily remove the need for restitution to fix a wrong done.

Forgiving does not mean you should protect someone from proper legal consequences.

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Forgiving cancels relational debt, but it is not free. It has been said, “[forgiveness costs] us deeply because through it we choose to lay down our right to have our offender owe us. It asks us to extend love and kindness even when it’s undeserved, to trust God to avenge our situation instead of ourselves, and to use life’s conflicts as opportunities to display God’s character.”¹

Few stories in Scripture better capture the essence of forgiveness than Jesus’ parable of the unforgiving servant recorded in Matthew 18:21–35. If you haven’t read it recently, take a moment to read it afresh.

The parable was provoked when Peter approached Jesus and asked, “Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Peter’s proposal was an attempt to surpass the rabbinic tradition of the day, which only required three acts of forgiveness. But Jesus stunned Peter by replying, “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

To illustrate his point, Jesus told a story of a king who called his accounts to be settled. One debtor owed the king an exorbitant amount (roughly the equivalent of \$5.8 billion). The man fell to his knees and begged, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.” The man’s ludicrous offer moved the king with compassion, and “he released him and forgave him the debt.” But no sooner than the forgiven man skipped out of the palace, he found someone who owed him roughly \$10,000, and he “began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay what you owe.’” The debtor pleaded with the forgiven man, “Have patience with me, and I will pay you.” Rather than remember the mercy he had received after making the same plea, the forgiven man put the debtor into prison.

Bewilderment over his calloused response sent shockwaves through the kingdom, eventually reaching the king. The king summoned the man, rebuked him, revoked his forgiveness, and sentenced him to life in prison. Jesus concluded the parable with his main point: “So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Matt. 18:35).

The parable reveals at least three principles about forgiveness.

Forgiveness is essential. Jesus expects forgiven people to forgive. If God has forgiven you the tremendous debt you owe for sin done against him, then you must be willing to forgive those who sin against you. Struggling to forgive is a reasonable response. Sin hurts us, often profoundly. But if you harden your heart against God’s command and are unwilling to forgive others, it may mean you are being presumptuous about God’s

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mercy toward you and that you have not actually been forgiven.

Forgiveness is motivated by forgiveness. Every reader expects the king's compassion to transform the debtor's life. The forgiven man should have been so moved by the mercy he'd received that he couldn't help but extend mercy to others. The loving-kindness lavished on him should inspire his heart to overflow with a willingness to forgive.

Forgiveness must be unlimited. When Jesus tells Peter to forgive up to seventy-seven times, he's not simply raising the bar — he's removing the roof. Forgiveness is to be unlimited for Jesus' disciples. We are to be always willing, ready, and desirous to extend forgiveness to others.

Why Should We Forgive?

While God's forgiveness toward us ought to be reason enough to forgive, Scripture supplies other motivations. What follows are four of the clearest reasons Christians ought to forgive those who sin against them.

1. Jesus commands forgiveness.

Jesus does not mince words: "Forgive and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). The Lord's prayer echoes the same exhortation, "Pray then like this...Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil...For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you" (Matt. 6:9–14). When we pray this way, we say to God, "Deal with my sins against you in the same way I deal with others who have sinned against me." Can you pray that way with a clear conscience? Can you say before the face of God, "Forgive me in the same way I forgive other people?" Those are bold prayers.

To be unwilling to forgive is to sin against Jesus in a way that calls our profession of faith into serious question. But when we forgive, we walk in his way. As a friend once said, "We are never more like Jesus than when we forgive."² Indeed, believers are forgivers. But we need not forgive out of compulsion, for "his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). Rather, as we grow in love for God who forgave us, we are moved to extend love in the form of forgiveness. As it is written, "he who is forgiven little loves little" but he who has been forgiven much loves much (Luke 7:36–50).

2. Forgiveness frees our hearts.

It has been said, "Bitterness is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die." An unforgiving spirit has deadly effects on our hearts. Bethany understood this all too well. She lost her grandson to a tragic shooting, and a year later, her son died of an accidental overdose. He had gotten clean but,

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in a weak moment, took pills that took his life. Bethany loved the Lord, but her broken heart was enraged at the man who dealt the drugs to her son.

Roughly a year later, Bethany received a call from the man who had given her son the pills. He pled for her forgiveness, saying that his role in her son's death had been eating him alive. Bethany told him, "Since Jesus has forgiven me so much, I want to forgive you." Afterward, she told me, "It felt like a weight was lifted off me. I didn't realize how much my hatred was dragging me down." Forgiveness set her free.

But we must not forgive merely to make ourselves feel better. We cannot reduce our walk with God to therapeutic pragmatism. Rather, forgiveness is an act of faith that obeys God's command, trusting that it will be worth it. Forgiving leads to freedom and the joy Jesus promises to those who obey him: "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full" (John 15:11). Forgiveness glorifies God and, mysteriously, brings healing to our souls. We were not designed to harbor resentment, vengeance, or bitterness. Forgiving does not fix all wrongs, but it is a way to entrust God with evils committed against us, knowing that he will address them in ways only he can. When we forgive, we trust God, who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay" (Rom. 12:19).

3. Forgiveness thwarts Satan's schemes.

It appears that someone in the Corinthian church was influenced by false teachers and revolted against the Apostle Paul. The congregation responded by exercising church discipline on him. We aren't sure of all the details, but a "punishment by the majority" of the congregation had taken place (2 Cor. 2:6).

Eventually, the man repented of his sin and sought forgiveness from the church. But some were hesitant to reconcile with him. This led Paul to exhort them, "You should...turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him...I have forgiven... in the presence of Christ...so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs" (2 Cor. 2:8–11).

Paul warns the Corinthians that Satan was circling their church like a shark in bloody water. He was scheming to devour the man, the church, and their witness for Jesus. In just a few verses, Paul shines a light on at least four of Satan's schemes.

First, *Satan desires to hinder forgiveness*. God desires his church to be a billboard displaying his forgiving love. Satan wants to tear it down by thwarting

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forgiveness, fueling bitterness, and deepening division. Paul begs that they make their love for him clear — leaving no doubt in his mind about what God thinks of him. They'd been faithful to discipline him; now, they must be faithful to forgive and restore him.

Second, *Satan desires to heap shame*. Rather than have the man be embraced by the church, Satan wants him to be “overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.” The words he uses are graphic depictions of the man being swallowed up with debilitating anxiety beyond his capacity to bear. Satan wants to shackle him with shame so he cannot walk in the freedom of God's restoring love. The devil desires to crush him with condemnation so that his perseverance in faith might be hindered. The church, however, must bear the weight of his sorrow by forgiving him. They must heal his shame with the balm of forgiving grace.

Third, *Satan desires to provoke pride*. Instead of allowing the church to deepen in Christ-like humility, he wants to stoke the church's self-righteous pride. He wants those who didn't succumb to the man's temptation to be blinded to their own need for grace. By doing this, the church will grow callous toward one another and eventually toward Christ. Instead, the Corinthians are to look to Christ and be humbled that their sin was also to blame for his crucifixion. They may not have sinned in the same way this man had, but they were sinners, nonetheless. They, like him, were debtors to grace.

Fourth, *Satan desires to grieve Jesus*. Satan knows that God is grieved when believers withhold love from one another (Eph. 4:30). Just as Jesus walks among his churches in Revelation 2–3, so he walks among the Corinthian church. This is why Paul says, “I have forgiven...in the presence of Christ” (literally, “in the face of Christ,” 2 Cor. 5:10). Paul wants them to understand that how they respond to the call to forgive will either grieve or please Jesus. They must not succumb to Satan's schemes.

Extending forgiveness is spiritual warfare. Canceling debt and comforting those who have sinned against us is Christ-like. Forgiving others keeps us from falling into Satan's trap.

4. *Forgiving commends the gospel.*

If there was anyone the church should have shunned, it was Saul. He approved of Stephen's execution, hunted believers house to house, and incited government assistance to exterminate the church (Acts 8:1–3, 9:1–2). Apart from divine intervention, Saul seemed invincible. Yet, the Lord stopped Saul's attacks and redeemed him to love the church he once sought to destroy (Acts 9:1–9).

But before Saul began ministering to others, Jesus called Ananias to serve

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as a portrait of gospel forgiveness to Saul. In Acts 9:17, we see the moment they met: “Ananias...entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus...sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit’...Then he rose and was baptized; and taking food, he was strengthened. For some days he was with the disciples at Damascus.”

In a tender moment of gospel affection, Ananias lovingly laid his hands on Saul — the one who’d hatefully laid hands on Christians. He spoke to him, saying, “Brother Saul.” Saul had afflicted the family, but now he was adopted into it. Fresh from the waters of baptism, Saul dined with the disciples. Their feasting was possible because of forgiveness. When we forgive others, we present a similar portrait to the world, saying, “This is the kind of love Jesus has shown to me; come and meet him. We love because he first loved us.”

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Did this section correct any misunderstandings of forgiveness you’ve had? How did it clarify things for you? Could you write a succinct description of forgiveness?
2. Of the four reasons to forgive listed above, which was the most challenging or convicting for you? Is there anything you’d add?

2

WHO AND HOW?

Scripture supplies clarity on who and how Christians are to forgive. Simply saying “always forgive everyone” is not accurate and certainly isn’t as helpful for people grappling with real hurts and a desire to honor the Lord. What follows are several Scripture-saturated principles to guide our efforts to forgive.

You should initiate forgiveness.

Believers have the responsibility to initiate forgiveness. We are to pursue both forgiving and being forgiven. In Matthew 5:23–24, Jesus says, “If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First, be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.”

God expects us to be humbly aware of ways relationships may need repair. If we have sinned against someone else, we must pursue forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus’ illustration is striking. He says that if you’re in the middle of intimate worship with God, and he brings to mind a neighbor, family member, co-worker, college acquaintance, or fellow church member — anyone whom you’ve sinned against — you’re to stop worshiping and pursue reconciliation.

To highlight the weight of Jesus’ teaching, consider a geographical observation. Offerings were made in the temple in Jerusalem. When Jesus gave his instructions concerning forgiveness in Matthew 5, he was in Galilee (Matt. 4:23). If you break out your Bible map, you’ll notice that Galilee was between 70–80 miles from Jerusalem. Without a car or bike, that’s a several-day journey. Jesus says that if you go all the way to Jerusalem and remember an offense — turn around. Go home. Make it right. Then come back. True worship is more than an offering — it’s reconciling love.

But what if someone has sinned against you? Are you justified in bitterly awaiting them to come to you or passively avoiding them until they die? No. Jesus says we are to pursue them. Consider Matthew 18:15, “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” *This is revolutionary teaching. In Matthew 5 and 18, who does Jesus expect to initiate reconciliation? You.*

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Me. Us. In every situation, regardless of who is at fault, Jesus calls us to initiate forgiveness.

In both passages, Jesus commands forgiveness of “your brother.” Does this mean we can withhold forgiveness from unbelievers? No. Listen to Jesus’ instruction in Mark 11:25, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses.” If *anyone* who has done *anything* comes to mind, we are to extend forgiveness to them. The Apostle Paul echoes the same idea in Romans 12:18, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people.” God calls us to do all we can to pursue peace, regardless of what others do. We shouldn’t feel justified in waiting for others to initiate reconciliation. God calls us to make the first step.

We should notice Paul’s qualification “if possible” (Rom. 12:18). There are cases where peace and reconciliation are impossible. If someone is unwilling to acknowledge a sin or is dangerous due to unrepentance, forgiveness cannot produce peaceful reconciliation. We’ll address tricky implications in a moment, but be sure that forgiveness is a radical call to pursue Christ-like love.

Forgive with urgent patience.

Jacob’s father was unfaithful to his mother and emotionally manipulated Jacob to make him feel like their divorce was his fault. Jacob’s father hadn’t spoken to him in nearly seven years, and the wounds had calloused over into a quiet bitterness — until Jacob met Jesus. As Jacob read the New Testament, God compelled him to consider forgiving his father. But how should he do it? With urgent patience.

Urgency. If we wait to forgive until we feel like it, we may never do it. Wounds like Jacob’s breed feelings of entitlement and callousness. But believers should not be led by their feelings. Instead, they must lead their feelings to submit to God and work toward forgiveness. Because forgiving others is an act of obedience to God, we must not delay in doing it (cf. Matt. 5:23–24; Mark 11:25).

Patience. Forgiving another person must not be done flippantly. Jesus calls us to count the cost of obedience (Luke 14:25–33). True forgiveness often requires much prayer, scriptural preparation, and wise counsel. Jacob’s fresh conviction needed time to discern the best way to approach his father and how to prepare his heart if his dad responded poorly.

Jacob prayed Psalm 119:32, asking God to help him forgive, “I will run in the way of your commandments when you enlarge my heart!” He desired

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to forgive urgently because God commanded it but approached obedience patiently because he needed God to enable his heart.

Forgive by looking to and leaning upon Jesus.

Navigating hurts, harms, and betrayals by ourselves feels impossible. But rather than remain hopeless, we should look to the Lord for help. Jesus has invited us, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). Jesus will help you to forgive. Look to him and lean on him for strength. Paul used this motivation when urging the Ephesians to flourish in love: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32).

Look to Jesus and see justice. The cross is God’s declaration that sin will not be winked at in his universe. God righteously detests our sins so much that his Son was crushed for them. Indeed, “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed” (Isa. 53:4–5). God’s goodness shows itself in swinging the sword of justice upon the brow of the innocent One.

The alternative to the cross is the eternal lake of fire. If sinners do not flee to Jesus, who was judged in their place, they will fall under the just judgment of God in hell. Vengeance is the Lord’s and he will have it (Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19–20). Jesus promises us that every idle word spoken will be called to account (Matt. 12:36) and that when we are treated unjustly, we should follow his example, for “When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23). Trusting that God judges justly frees us to forgive generously.

Forgiving does not say to our offenders, “What you did is ok” or “It’s not that big of a deal.” No! Forgiveness does not minimize wrongs done to us. All wrongs done will be dealt with justly. The assurance of justice liberates us to forgive. A sister in our church who had a painful past relationship with her cruel mother said that she is comforted greatly when our church sings, “For my life he bled and died, Christ will hold me fast; Justice has been satisfied, he will hold me fast.”³ She knows that her own sins have been dealt with in Christ, but she’s also reminded of the holiness of God and the fact that all sin, including the sin done to her by her mother, will be dealt with justly — either at the cross or in hell.

Look to Jesus and see mercy. Nothing moves the heart to forgive like having been forgiven. God’s mercy toward you in Christ is the most potent weapon against a

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bitter heart. If you are struggling to forgive, turn your attention to the mercy of Jesus. Consider how patiently he pursued you. Consider how compassionate he was toward your calloused heart. Look to the cross and see the Son of God bleeding for you. Hear him cry out, “It is finished!” and know that his work was finished for you. Hear the heart of God saying, “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord God; so turn, and live” (Ezek. 18:32). Ask God to give you the same type of compassion toward those who have hurt you.

Lean on Jesus for strength. Forgiveness requires supernatural strength. Thankfully, God supplies strength to obey all he commands us to do (Phil. 2:13). Jesus warns us, “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (John 15:5) while assuring us that “I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). Are you too weak and tired to extend forgiveness? There is good news for you. Jesus promises, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). How do we access this strength? Pray. Read Scripture. Sing to the Lord. Worship eagerly. Keep seeking Jesus through his Word. Open your life to another believer who can encourage you and challenge you to trust God. As you do, you’ll be changed and empowered to extend forgiveness.

Trust Jesus for results. Lynn loved her grandmother, but family drama had strained their relationship. She desired to reconcile with her aging grandmother, so she initiated a conversation aimed at reconciliation. Lynn prayed, prepared, and came up with all the ways she could apologize for what had transpired. When she visited her grandmother, she poured out her heart and asked her to forgive her. But rather than receive mercy, her grandmother looked her in the eyes and said, “You’re dead to me. Leave this house and never come back.” It was a crushing blow to Lynn who had done all she could to make things right. This story reminds us that only God can change a heart. At first glance, it may seem that Lynn’s efforts were wasted. They were not. She labored with God for months leading up to that conversation, and it radically changed her life. She was humbled, her faith was strengthened, and those who walked with her were encouraged to examine their own lives. Lynn’s responsibility was to pursue peace and leave the results up to God faithfully (Rom. 12:18). As you pursue peace and reconciliation with others, pray for God to help you, but know that his timing may not be yours. Sow and water seeds but remember that God gives the growth (1 Cor. 3:6).

Forgive with the help of other believers.

The Christian life is not meant to be lived in isolation. God has called us out of sin and into Christ — and Christ’s church. Believers are united as a family who love one another and encourage one another in obedience to Jesus. The author of Hebrews commands us, “exhort one another every day, as long

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as it is called ‘today,’ that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:14). Unforgiveness has a deceiving effect on our hearts. It convinces us that we are entitled to bitterness. If we foster unforgiveness, our ability to persevere in faith will be endangered. This is why we need godly friends who exhort us each day to lean on God for strength to forgive. We need them to pray for us, counsel us, encourage us, keep us accountable, and weep or rejoice with us along the way.

Philemon was a faithful believer from Colossae. He was wealthy enough to host a church in his home and had a household servant named Onesimus. Onesimus apparently stole something from Philemon and fled to Rome, hoping to get a fresh start. God, however, had other plans. Onesimus providentially crossed paths with the Apostle Paul, who led him to faith in Christ. Onesimus became convicted that he needed to return and reconcile with Philemon. Paul composed a letter pleading for Philemon to extend forgiveness and receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ. If you haven’t read it recently, take a moment to read the book of Philemon.

In the letter, we find seven ways Paul stirs forgiveness and reconciliation.

First, *Paul encourages Onesimus’s repentance*. By sending Onesimus to Philemon, Paul is helping Onesimus live out the repentance God has worked in him. We don’t know how much Paul helped Onesimus understand his sin against Philemon, but it seems highly likely that it would have been central to many of their conversations. If you are discipling someone, regularly discuss any strained relationships and ways forgiveness may need to be asked for or extended. Be a friend like Paul and have a friend like Paul to spur you on in obedience to God.

Second, *Paul encourages Philemon’s faith* (v4–7, 21). Throughout the letter, Paul highlights Philemon’s love and faith (v5), which have provoked joy and refreshment among believers (v7). He speaks of confidence in Philemon’s obedience, trusting that he’ll go over and above what has been asked (v21). Paul also assures Philemon that he is praying for him (v6). Prayer is not a mere kindness toward another believer who is trying to extend forgiveness. Prayer is essential because it invokes the power of Almighty God to intervene. Onesimus needs spiritual strength to humbly seek forgiveness. Philemon needs spiritual strength to extend forgiveness. Prayer pleads with God to give it. If you’re helping someone forgive, provoke them to obedience by regularly praying for them and encouraging ways you’ve seen God work in their life.

Third, *Paul leverages his relationship* (v8–14). Paul had a long-standing

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relationship with Philemon and serves as a faithful example of how to steward relational capital. Don't hesitate to draw upon relational currency to push people toward obedience to God. Why else has God given you the relationship? Nothing shows love like helping a friend obey the Lord.

Fourth, *Paul calls Philemon to full-hearted obedience* (v8–9). Paul wasn't just concerned with the outcome of the intervention. He knows that true, lasting change only comes from a heart that has been changed. So, rather than manipulate Philemon into welcoming Onesimus out of compulsion, he stirs compassion. Prayerfully help people desire to forgive from the heart rather than dutifully go through the motions.

Fifth, *Paul highlights God's sovereign work* (v15–16). Paul helps Philemon see the big picture of God's sovereign work in their situation. He does not downplay the offense Onesimus experienced or belittle the betrayal he felt. Onesimus stole from Philemon and disrespected him. But he lifts Philemon's eyes by saying, "Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while" (v15). He wants him to consider that God's gracious providence let Philemon run from him right into the arms of Christ. It was all part of God's plan "that you might have him back forever...and not just as a bondservant...but as a beloved brother." Find someone who can help you see the big picture of how God might be working in the midst of your situation.

Sixth, *Paul offers to repay any debts* (v17–19). Paul wants nothing material to stand in the way of reconciliation. He offers to assist in restitution if it would encourage Philemon to forgive Onesimus. This follows the model of Jesus, who sacrificed his rights, glory, and life to bless others. If you have the means and can help remove physical barriers to reconciliation by paying debts or loaning money, consider following Paul's example.

Seventh, *Paul highlights spiritual benefits* (v20). Paul urges forgiveness by saying, "I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ" (v20). Paul assures Philemon that being God's instrument of mercy in Onesimus's life will also bless him. He wants to be encouraged by seeing the gospel lived out. He longs to see Philemon view his former bondservant as a beloved brother in Christ. He pleads with Philemon to be a messenger of mercy who embodies the gospel. Reminding people of the eternal importance of forgiveness along with its life-giving ripple effects in this life can supply much-needed fuel to pursue reconciliation.

Extending forgiveness can be uniquely grueling and is best pursued with the help of friends who are quick to remind you of the gospel. Who is helping you navigate these tricky waters? How can you help others do the same?

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Forgive by trusting God's sovereign goodness.

Few stories in Scripture illustrate the interplay between God's sovereign goodness and extending forgiveness like the story of Joseph (Gen. 37–50). Joseph was one of twelve brothers. His father, Jacob, had a unique love for Joseph that provoked bitter jealousy from his brothers. A plot formed among them where they kidnapped Joseph, sold him as a slave, and then staged his death. Upon returning home, the brothers lied to their father, telling him that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

Joseph was taken to Egypt, where he underwent a series of tragic hardships that left him falsely accused, imprisoned, and forgotten by everyone — except God. After roughly twenty years, the Lord used an interpreted dream to establish Joseph as second-in-command in Egypt. A worldwide famine led people to flock to Egypt to buy bread from Joseph, including his brothers. Joseph recognized them, but time had hidden his identity from them.

After a series of perplexing events, the brothers became convinced that their troubles were God repaying them for what they did to Joseph. He discerned that they were deeply regretful for their sin against him and even saw one of his brothers, Judah, offer to endanger his life to spare his younger brother Benjamin.

Joseph became overwhelmed with emotion and revealed his identity to his brothers. Surprise was eclipsed by terror as they feared that Joseph would use his power to repay them for what they had done. But instead, he showed them mercy and requested that they bring Jacob to Egypt to be cared for by him. Once Jacob died, the brothers once again feared, saying, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.” (Gen. 50:15). After learning of their fears, “Joseph wept...[and] said to them, ‘Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today’” (Gen. 50:17–20).

We could mine many lessons about forgiveness from this story, but the most glaring is that God's sovereign goodness freed Joseph from avenging himself. Joseph was able to appreciate the way God's wisdom had arranged circumstances, including being betrayed and sold by his brothers, to bring about good. The privilege of seeing such clear connections between God's purposes and our pain may happen in this life, but they are rarer than we would prefer.

More often, we are forced to look to eternity, to the future where God assures us that “this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 5:18). When God says our afflictions in

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this life are light, he is not minimizing our pain; he is magnifying the coming glory. He is using the abuse, betrayal, slander, assaults, neglect, oppression, and pain of this life to prepare an eternal joy that will far outweigh them. So, no matter how weighty our wounds, the weight of glory that Jesus is bringing with him far outweighs them. In Romans 8:28, we are promised “that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” Not all things are good in this life, but God is good. And if we can rest in that fact, we will be free to extend forgiveness in this life because we know he will make it right in the life to come.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Did any of this section challenge you? Are there any situations in your life that would benefit from what you've just read?
2. How does true forgiveness reflect what God does for us in Christ?

3

STICKY FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness in a fallen world is almost always tricky. Wounds are personal and the application of the principles we have discussed will look different for many people. I intentionally reserved these clarifying points until the end. If you are like me, you can be tempted to see your pain as so unique that it may excuse you from following the clear and weighty words of Jesus. Nuancing is important, but if done unwisely, it can lead to stripping the heart out of God's command to forgive. At the same time, forgiveness can be messy, as evidenced by the six following questions.

Question #1: Must I forgive and forget?

There are sayings people assume are in the Bible but aren't. "God helps those who help themselves" and "God will not give you more than you can handle" are two examples. As a young child, a Sunday school teacher taught me another. In a lesson on forgiveness, she told us that God wanted us to "forgive and forget." At the time, it seemed reasonable, even biblical advice. But God does not command us to forgive and forget.

Scripture does say:

"Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense" (Prov. 19:11).

"[love]...is not resentful" (or "keeps no record of wrongs," *NIV84*) (1 Cor. 13:5)

"Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Pet. 4:8).

Yes, we are to be magnanimous with sinners. But that doesn't mean we always "forgive and forget." This saying likely finds its roots in how God deals with our sins. In Psalm 103:12, we are told, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us." The distance between east and west is incalculable. When God forgives, he removes our sins as far as our minds can imagine. The prophet Micah proclaims, "He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:19). When God forgives, he goes mafia on our sins and sends them to the bottom of the ocean, never to be seen again. Isaiah assures us, "I am he who blots out your transgressions for my

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own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (Isa. 43:25).

These verses do not mean that the omniscient God cannot remember our sins. He is not ignorant of what we’ve done. Instead, it means that because Jesus has paid for those sins in full, we are forgiven, and “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). God will never bring up our sins to shame or condemn us. We have been reconciled to him. He has forgiven and chosen to forget our sins.

We can long to forgive as God does, but our human weakness hinders us. This is why we need to rely on God’s grace for help navigating the tricky realities of forgiving those who have sinned against us. One crucial reality to remember is the distinction between forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration.

Forgiveness → Reconciliation → Restoration

Forgiveness	Reconciliation	Restoration
Decision	Process	Result

Forgiveness is a decision in which we choose to cancel the relational debt of another who has sinned against us. From that point on, we choose to relate to them as forgiven. Forgiveness is spoken of on two levels in Scripture: attitudinal and reconciled.⁴

Attitudinal forgiveness (sometimes called vertical) describes the attitude or heart-level forgiveness in which we forgive people, regardless of whether they have repented or not. Jesus says, “Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses” (Mark 11:25). As soon as a Christian finds unforgiveness in their heart, they confess it and entrust the situation to God. Genuine forgiveness will show itself in freedom from a desire for vengeance and a desire to see the offender made right with God (Rom. 12:17–21).

Amber’s father was a wicked man. He berated her and her mother unceasingly for years. Finally, he left the family and moved in with another lover. He mocked their pain, even writing Amber calloused letters saying he wished she was never born. His words tortured her, yet she was convinced that God wanted her to forgive him. Fear and uncertainty plagued her until a friend helped her see that forgiveness did not mean forgetting and that the decision to forgive her dad was more between

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her and the Lord than between her and her dad. Amber began to pray for the desire to forgive. Slowly, her heart softened, and she surrendered to the Lord's call to forgive her father from her heart. Forgiving like this reflects the heart of God, of whom it is said, "You are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Neh. 9:17). May we ever grow in desiring to forgive like God.

Reconciled forgiveness (sometimes called horizontal) describes relational forgiveness that extends forgiveness to a repentant offender and begins the reconciliation process. Jesus speaks of this in Luke 17:3–4, "Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him." In this scenario, Jesus is clear, "If he repents, forgive him." This level of forgiveness is conditional upon the offender confessing and repenting of his or her sin. Attitudinal forgiveness moves toward reconciled forgiveness once there is an acknowledgment of sin.

Reconciliation is a process in which we learn to relate to the person we have forgiven in ways that, if possible, rebuild trust, heal wounds, and pursue peaceful relations with them. Repentance by the offender must be evidenced for this process to occur. Wisdom is required to discern true repentance and determine the pace of reconciliation.

True repentance. Second Corinthians 7:10 assures us, "Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." Godly grief prepares our hearts for true repentance. This repentance begins with seeing our sin against God (Ps. 51:4) and being grieved that we have grieved him. Worldly grief leads to fake repentance that centers on self-pity. False repentance focuses on damage control, blame-shifting, and excuse-making. It minimizes and rationalizes our sin. True repentance, however, mourns that we have sinned against God and is willing to do whatever it takes to bring healing to the offended person.

Pace of reconciliation. Reconciliation's speed may be strikingly brief or quite long, depending upon the severity of the offense and the pace at which God grants healing. Just as reconciliation is a process, repentance is often a process. Most of us get into our messes by taking a thousand small steps in the wrong direction. Repentance is often a thousand small steps in the right direction. Genuine repentance recognizes that their sin may require the pace to move slowly. Even when God forgives us, he does not always free us from consequences for our sins. Reconciliation cannot

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be rushed and typically requires a mature, trained, unbiased person to ensure that conversations are prayerful, honest, and manipulation-free.

Restoration is the result of forgiveness and reconciliation. It is a relational state of healing in which the pain no longer dominates, healing has happened, and trust has been rebuilt. Not all relationships that have been fractured by sin can be restored. But many can. The power of the gospel is able to raise dead sinners to life, and it can heal even the most wounded of relationships. Pray for restoration. Labor for restoration. God delights in this work, so do not lose heart. Hope in him who is able to do more than we can ask or imagine (Eph. 3:20).

Question #2: What if I still feel angry?

Even after genuinely forgiving, unsettled emotions can flare up unexpectedly. This shouldn't surprise us. We are not robots who heartlessly navigate life. We are embodied image bearers with real emotions, unstable passions, abiding sin, and ever-changing circumstances. Maybe a memory of how you were hurt sneaks into your mind or perhaps you see old patterns rear their ugly head — and you feel anger simmering in your heart. You may wonder, "Didn't I forgive them?" While forgiveness is a decision, the healing that comes afterward takes time. Remain prayerful. Remain in close community with gospel-minded people who can help you process both past hurts and present struggles. The Lord is at work. He is ready and willing to help in every layer of healing. Do not grow weary.

Question #3: What if forgiveness is dangerous?

Forgiveness is hard. It will almost always include uncomfortable, painful, or wearisome feelings. But difficulty is different than danger. We have acknowledged that some relationships are so marred by the scars of sin that forgiveness is required, but reconciliation is not advisable or possible (cf. "if possible," Rom 12:18). Cases of physical abuse, sexual abuse, or severe emotional manipulation may leave someone so wounded that healing is unattainable this side of heaven.

If you have been sinned against in ways that make moving from forgiveness to reconciliation dangerous, remember these truths:

Healing is possible. What you have experienced need not define you. In Christ there is abundant hope for healing. God wastes nothing and will use what has happened to you to deepen your trust in him and to be a source of help for others (2 Cor. 1:3–11).

Surround yourself with gospel friends. As we've said, walking the path of forgiveness should not be done alone. If you have been deeply hurt, you

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need a gospel-centered church and trained gospel-centered partners to help you process the traumatic experiences you have endured.

Examine your reasons for not reconciling. Being hurt does not entitle us to avoid challenging acts of faith. What they did to you may indeed be so horrific that you are not able to be around them without having retraumatizing physical and emotional responses. They may not be repentant, which clearly relieves you from the need to pursue reconciliation. God does not ask you to endanger yourself by extending trust to untrustworthy people. However, he calls you to be willing to do whatever he asks you to do. Process your heart posture before the Lord and with gospel friends to ensure that any resistance to reconciliation is done by faith and not sinful fear.

Entrust yourself to God. The Lord knows your weakness (Ps. 103:14). He will be patient with you as you walk the path of healing that he leads you on. Seek him in prayer. When you are afraid, put your trust in him (Ps. 56:3). The Lord knows your weakness and has storehouses full of grace for you (Ps. 31:19; 2 Cor. 12:9). The author of Hebrews summons you, “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens...who [is able] to sympathize with our weaknesses...Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:14–16). Draw near to Jesus, his grace and mercy will help you.

If you have sinned against someone in ways that hinder reconciliation, keep these truths in mind:

You must repent. You will be held accountable for what you have done. No sin will be overlooked on the Last Day. Heed God’s call to repent (Acts 17:30). Confess your sin to God with full honesty (Ps. 51; 1 John 1:9). Repent of your sin completely. Express remorse and ask for those you have hurt to forgive you. If you have sinned against someone in ways they may be considered abusive or dangerous, you should seek counsel from a trained expert before contacting them so they can assist you in the process. Repentance may include involving civil authorities if your actions were illegal. Repentance may include paying restitution for years of counseling expenses (Luke 19:8). True repentance will be demonstrated in doing whatever it takes to walk in the paths of righteousness. Do not fear; God will be with you (Heb. 13:5b–6).

Forgiveness from God is abundant. There is much hope for you if you have confessed your sin to God and truly repented of it. Where sin

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abounds, grace abounds all the more (Rom. 5:20). God forgives the worst of sinners so that his mercy can be magnified in and through you (1 Tim. 1:15–16). Those who have been forgiven by God stand as righteous before him. He delights in you despite what you have done. This is the beauty of the gospel.

Entrust your desires to God. God removes condemnation for our sins, but he does not remove their consequences. Some sins committed will forever change your life and your relationships. You may feel the weight of what you have done and deeply desire to reconcile. Entrust those good desires to God. Initiate contact only through an impartial, trusted mediator. Wait upon the Lord. Willingness to have further conversations may be possible, or they may not. On the Day of Judgment, you will be held accountable for what you do, not how others respond.

Question #4: What if they don't want my forgiveness?

Some people will not see their need to be forgiven. They may be blinded by their sin and calloused against God's conviction. We cannot make someone see their need to be forgiven; only God can do that. In these instances, we are still responsible for forgiving them from the heart (cf. attitudinal/internal forgiveness). Jesus gave us an example to follow when he prayed from the cross, "Forgive them for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). He prayed for their forgiveness despite them despising their need for it. Jesus gave similar instructions to us when he said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27–28). Our enemies do not think they need our forgiveness. We cannot control that, but we are to show them the supernatural love of Christ by blessing them, even if they curse us.

Question #5: What if they hurt me again?

Moriah had worked hard to forgive Jeff. He had been caught looking at pornography, and it rocked their young marriage. Jeff owned his sin and had made tremendous strides in honoring the Lord and his wife. That is until he compromised again while she was out of town. In an instant, the year of hard work felt like it had been thrown away. Jeff confessed his sin to his pastor, to her, and then asked her to forgive him once again. Moriah felt an overwhelming mix of righteous and sinful anger. She had not expected to be here again, and her heart was walled off to her husband.

Does Moriah have to forgive Jeff again? Yes. Though Jeff's sin was serious, so were Jesus' words, "Pay attention to yourselves! If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (Luke

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17:3–4). Forgiveness must be offered without limit. Jeff will need to make serious strides to live out full repentance and the reconciliation process with Moriah will take increased efforts. But God's grace is sufficient for both of their needs. A time may come when patterns of sin, whether pornography or otherwise, become so damaging to the trust of the relationship that the validity of one's profession of faith is called into question. These case-by-case situations will require wise leadership by godly pastors and possibly outside counselors.⁵

Question #6: Can I forgive if they are dead?

Sarah stood next to her sister's grave. The silence of Ashley's tombstone reminded her of the coldness of their relationship. Her sister had been cruel and exacting. Her words had scarred Sarah's soul, and the untreated wound had become infected by sin. Sarah's destructive course wasn't Ashley's fault, but it was undoubtedly connected. Ashley's untimely death left Sarah wanting one more chance to express her hurts with the hope of hearing Ashley say, "Please forgive me." But now it was too late. Or was it?

Death robs us of much, but it does not rob us of the responsibility and opportunity to extend forgiveness. Forgiveness is a decision we make to cancel another person's relational debt. Ultimately, forgiveness is a decision that God empowers us to make and that we do to obey him. Death does not hinder Sarah from choosing to forgive her late sister. Sarah can entrust her sister's soul to the one who judges justly (1 Pet. 2:23–24).

If you have been hurt by someone who has died or whom you will never be able to locate, you can still forgive them. Attitudinal forgiveness is possible because you are forgiving from the heart. Pray to the Lord and reflect on all you wish you could say to that person. Consider writing it down. You would likely be helped to process your feelings with a trusted gospel-minded friend or counselor. If you would benefit by going to the person's graveside and saying words out loud, it is perfectly fine. But ultimately, bring your pain to the Lord. As you consider their destiny, rest in the words of Abraham, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just" (Gen. 18:25)? God will do what is right. Trust him.

Discussion & Reflection:

1. Are there any situations in your life that these questions address? How did this section help you?
2. How would you summarize the difference between forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration?
3. Of the questions above, which challenges your understanding of forgiveness the most?



CONCLUSION

Someday soon, existence as we have experienced it will cease. The Lord Jesus will return and bring to conclusion what we have known as human history. On that day, he will triumphantly raise all people from the grave and assemble them before his great white throne for judgment (Matt. 12:36–37; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11–15).

On that day, nothing will be more treasured than forgiveness. To stand, not in our own righteousness, like the myriads who will be condemned in their sin. But to stand forgiven, clothed in robes of righteousness purchased by Christ's blood and given by God's grace. To be numbered among the forgiven, whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. To be welcomed with the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:23). To be joyfully sung over by God himself (Zeph. 3:17) and respond to him with songs of eternal thanksgiving (Ps. 79:13). Our songs will be inspired by God's many acts of mercy. Central to them all will be his unmerited, immeasurable, benevolent forgiveness granted to us in Christ Jesus.

We began this study at the table of former enemies who had become forgiven friends through the gospel of Jesus Christ. We conclude with a picture of glory to come in which another table will be central. This meal will be hosted atop the mountain called Zion. The table in that place will host the marriage supper of the Lamb where the forgiven will eat rich food and drink well-aged wine (Rev. 19:9; Isa. 25:6). There, reconciled enemies and forgiven foes will sit side-by-side. Together we will lift a toast of thanks crying out, "Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isa. 25:9). Lord, hasten that day.

As you read this field guide, consider that day. Allow the hope of glory and certainty of seeing Christ move you to extend forgiveness. Forgive today in light of that day. Forgiving those who have hurt you can be terribly difficult. Forgiving requires humility. It requires help from God. But I assure you of this:

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if you honor Jesus by forgiving, you will not regret it on that last day. Make decisions today that you will be thankful for ten thousand years from now when you stand before God. When you behold God face-to-face, you will not regret forgiving those who hurt you in this life. In some way, your enjoyment of eternal life will spring from obedience in this life (Rev. 19:8). Forgive. Pursue peace. Labor to reconcile. Extend mercy.

Do not lose heart dear saint, we're almost home.



FOR FURTHER STUDY

Tim Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?*

David Powlison, *Good and Angry*

Brad Hambrick, *Making Sense of Forgiveness: Moving from Hurt Toward Hope*

Hayley Satrom, *Forgiveness: Reflecting God's Mercy (31-Day Devotionals for Life)*

Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness: Biblical Answers for Complex Questions and Deep Wounds*

Steve Cornell, "How to Move from Forgiveness to Reconciliation," TGC article, March 2012

Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*



ENDNOTES

1. Andrea Thom, “What is Biblical Forgiveness?” TGC Canada, September 23, 2020.
2. Matthew Martens, *Reforming Criminal Justice: A Christian Proposal* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 158.
3. *He Will Hold Me Fast*, these lines written by Matt Merker, 2013.
4. These concepts come from D. A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places*, quoted in Tim Keller, *Forgive: Why Should I and How Can I?*, 82, and David Powlison, *Good & Angry: Redeeming Anger, Irritation, Complaining, and Bitterness*, 84–87.
5. Consider “Pornography and Church Discipline,” *Desiring God*, April 30, 2022.



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PROJECT

GARRETT KELL has imperfectly followed Jesus since a friend shared the gospel with him in college. Shortly after his conversion, he began serving in pastoral ministry in Texas, Washington D.C., and at Del Ray Baptist Church in Alexandria, Virginia, since 2012. He is married to Carrie, and they have six children together.

