



A Plea for a Return to Biblical Repentance Is Forgiveness Unconditional?

by Barbara Buzzard

This is a surprisingly controversial subject. It appears that society has changed the ground rules and the requirements from what they used to be, when an offense occurs. No longer is the biblical model an absolute for rebuilding a fractured relationship. Our standards for forgiveness have so broadened that even in some “Christian” counseling repentance is no longer required. That seems to defy the biblical model as seen in 2 Chronicles 7:14: “If my people...will humble themselves and pray...and seek...and turn...then I will hear...and forgive.” And Jeremiah 9:5b: “They commit iniquity and are too weary to repent” (NRSV). Isaiah 1:27: “Zion will be redeemed by justice and those in her who **repent** by righteousness.” God *requires* a contrite heart. It is the only way He can work with us. There is no substitution. Beware substitutions for a broken heart. Biblically, repentance seems to be required and that is what is at the heart of this great divide, as society and even counselors advise, “Just move on.”

Cheap Forgiveness?

“God has an open door policy, but the door we go through is marked ‘Repentance.’”¹ Repentance is the price of entry. As in Matthew 3:8 we are to bring forth fruit in keeping with or worthy of repentance. However, many authors and counselors disagree. They maintain that one must forgive no matter what, and they argue that this is the Christian way. Those on the other side regard this as *cheap forgiveness* and stress that it bypasses the injury, as well as hampering a possibility of developing a healthy relationship. They feel that the absence of *moral disgust* which should precede repentance is *dangerous*. They see forgiveness as being accomplished when the victim no longer has to hold the wrongdoer responsible for the injustice; the wrongdoer holds *himself* responsible. There is much at stake here — the future relationship.

Forgiveness does not equal reconciliation. Nor does it necessarily restore a relationship. Without remorse, we don’t even have the assurance of a temporary cease- fire. For example, if the offense is not repented of, how can the victim know that it will not be repeated again and again? (Obviously, there are no guarantees and we all fail, but what is in question here is whether *the heart* of the violator is changed. Is it safe to reinstate a good relationship if the offender has not changed radically?) Trust must be rebuilt and it is a spirit of remorse that can do that. When the offender demonstrates that he understands and is disturbed by the harm he has caused; when he works to make repairs, it is then that one might find it safe to invite him back into one’s life.

More popular is a “not too much required” approach, with “move on” advice, a kind of quick “one size fits all” forgive and forget for all-comers. The other side says this “forgive and forget, get on with your life” philosophy is an insult, revealing a moral shakiness that is not what Scripture teaches.

No Substitutions Allowed

There is a constant theme of repentance in the Scriptures. Repentance is mentioned ninety times in the Jerusalem Bible. God invites, even begs His people to repent. He specifically gives us time to repent: “Do you not realize that *God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?* But by your hard and *impenitent* heart you are storing up wrath” (Rom. 2:4-5). And Jeremiah 3:13a employs the same theme: “Only acknowledge your guilt.” God gives us opportunity to humble *ourselves*. It is honesty of character that He is after. The true test of an individual is admitting and fixing his mistakes. Psalm 7:12 warns that if we do

¹Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Peace*, 1998.

not repent, God will sharpen His sword, and Proverbs 28:13 compares those who cover their sins with those who confess them. The latter will be the ones who receive mercy.

Revelation 3:19 exhorts us to be diligent and repent. Repentance will be redeeming (Isa. 1:27). “Sorrow without repentance is the kind that results in death” (2 Cor. 7:10b). “People who cover over their sins will not prosper. But if they confess and forsake them, they will receive mercy” (Prov. 28:13). Is it possible that society has substituted defiance for accountability and justification for penitence?

Genuine Forgiveness Requires a Transfer of Vigilance

“After a traumatic injury, you, the hurt party, are likely to become hyper-vigilant, patrolling the border between you and the offender, making sure you’ll never be violated or fooled again. You may live and breathe the injury, obsessed with its grubby details. The offender in contrast may want to repress, deny, or minimize his wrongful behavior. With Genuine Forgiveness, a profound shift in preoccupation takes place. You, the offender, demonstrate that you’re fully conscious of your transgression and intend never to repeat it. You, the hurt party, become less preoccupied with the injury and begin to let it go.”² Please note the interaction which takes place here. The offender acknowledges the full force of the violation. **Genuine forgiveness requires the offender’s involvement and participation.** (Obviously, there are exceptions, e.g. after the death of the offender.) However, this is exactly the opposite of what is often being advised; there seems to be an ethic in place to make both “sides” equal, i.e. there is no victim and no offender. This is, in my opinion, psychology gone mad, choosing not to do the honest work involved — naming wrongdoing for what it actually is.

There is an ancient Chinese proverb which says, “The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.” We *do* have the violator and the violated. Tragically, people in our society do creepy and vicious things. Part of the work of a counselor would be to urge repentance, not to avoid the sin or to equate the two parties. Resorting to group hugs at the end of the day, failing true and honest counsel, in my opinion, is a fraud.

“To forgive sin under all circumstances, unconditionally, and to reconcile with the unrepentant offender communicates a false gospel. It is not biblical. This is not what God does, nor is it what He commands us to do. However, to be unforgiving of sins against us by others also communicates a false gospel. So what is a believer to do?”³

Face the Past for the Sake of the Future

“Genuine Forgiveness is not a pardon granted unilaterally by the hurt party. It’s a shared venture, an exchange between two people bound together by an interpersonal violation.”⁴ The author also makes the point that “Genuine Forgiveness must be earned. It comes with a price that the offender must be willing to pay. In exchange, the hurt party must allow him to settle his debt.”⁵ This simple and biblical formula is what is needed to restore trust. The “move on” approach is in stark contrast to this. It can be used as an excuse never to face the issue. We face the past *for the sake of* the future.

“And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man...Going back is the quickest way on.”⁶ This is against our nature, but is both biblical and smart.

God seems always to work through process, e.g. learning, growing, maturing. He doesn’t just hand us a finished product. This process must be completed. As with medical prescriptions which emphasize “take exactly as directed,” so too, God’s process or recipe must be followed precisely; a step cannot be removed or eliminated. The Scriptures give us clear, delineated steps as to what action to take with regard to the

² Janis Abrahms, Ph.D., *How Can I Forgive You?* p. 122.

³ Dana Neel, *Forgiveness*.

⁴ *How Can I Forgive You?* p. 123.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁶ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 28, 29.

offense of a brother. (It is interesting to note that Dr. Laura and Dr. Phil include this step of repentance as a *necessity* for rebuilding relationships.) They seem even to maintain a stricter code of behavior than some Christian counselors. Is there not a possibility that we have so massaged and gentled what we don't want to face that we have done damage to those seeking help and advice? And the process becomes ineffective, that vital ingredient of repentance being undervalued and passed over. "It seems that many today want to propose sin without consequences, morality without absolutes, forgiveness without repentance."⁷

"Reconciliation should not occur until there is repentance."

*"If forgiveness, fulfilled in reconciliation, is to occur, evil must repent with clarity and conviction. Does this mean that if repentance does not occur, then forgiveness cannot be offered? If forgiveness is defined as a continuing process of hungering for restoration, revoking revenge, and offering good gifts, then we are to forgive until there is reconciliation. But reconciliation should not occur until there is repentance."*⁸ This view makes sense to me. There is a time and a place to move on, but *not* without this critical ingredient. Unless people speak the truth about what they have done and change their minds and their behavior, a relationship of trust is just not possible. Which is to say that forgiveness does not always restore trust. Nor will forgiveness necessarily bring reconciliation. Repentance is the key here. It can bring a regenerative power to the relationship. It is what God wants most from us. The negative side is this: "If one does not repent, God will sharpen His sword" (Ps. 7:12).

Consider this scenario: two young boys are fighting. One purposely lashes out and kicks the other. You interrupt the fight. The offender is still angry, the other boy hurt and crying. What would you require before you let them play together again? If you insisted on forgiveness without remorse, why would the boy who has been kicked want to invite the other boy back into his life? Perhaps too few people ask themselves this question: why would X (who I have grievously offended) want to have me back in his life?

The message of repentance was both the first message after Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:15) and the last message to the church (Rev. 3:19), both messages of extreme importance. Repentance was the urgent message of all the prophets. Paul recognizes its significance: "Now I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because your grief led to repentance" (2 Cor. 7:9). Repentance pleases God, but it *heals* us. It is restorative and nutritious to our very souls. We don't do God or the world much good without a broken heart, one of the after-effects of true sorrow. It is a gift we can offer to God and He readily accepts it as a hugely valuable token. "I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent" (Rev. 3:19). We deceive ourselves if we think there is any other way.

No Papering over the Offense

As seen in *People of the Lie*,⁹ a healthy sense of self loathing is a good thing after an action which has caused hurt and pain. It can move a person to action, to a place of contrite humility. A very stern warning is given in Acts. 28:27 with regard to the hardening of one's heart which prevents one from repenting and being healed. In today's world this hardening of the heart happens when we justify and rationalize our actions. We deceive ourselves into thinking we behaved properly when, in fact, we have violated the human condition. The essence of repentance is just to *say* and *be* sorry — authentic, genuine words of sorrow may have a hugely healing effect. As everyone will have to bow the knee, so too everyone will have to say sorry, to acknowledge guilt. No papering over the offense, no excuses and no minimizing of damage. In speaking of the Old Testament concept of restitution which accompanied some offenses: "Restitution can also instill true moral guilt in a person, which can lead to genuine repentance and a decision by the perpetrator to make different choices leading to a better life."¹⁰

⁷ J. Gerald Harris, editorial, *The Christian Index*, May 16, 2013.

⁸ Dr. Dan B. Allender & Dr. Tremper Longman III, *Bold Love*.

⁹ M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie*

¹⁰ Cal Thomas, "Restitution and Shaming," *The Citizen*, Dec. 3, 2014.

Life Lessons

“In truth, the mechanics of good apologies aren’t difficult to understand. A bad apology is cagey and ungenerous, an attempt to avoid taking full responsibility. Good apologies are about stepping up. The 12th-century sage Maimonides said that true repentance requires humility, remorse, forbearance, and reparation. Not much has changed since then. Basically, you must take ownership of the offense, even if it makes you uncomfortable. Name what you did, even if it makes you squirm...Acknowledge the impact of what you did. ...make reparations...If you said something bone-headed, educate yourself about why your remark was offensive. And for heaven’s sake, never present yourself as the aggrieved party. You are not the hero of this story. That’s why you have to say, ‘I’m sorry that I did something hurtful,’ not ‘Sorry if you were hurt.’ A good apology means laying yourself bare. It means putting yourself in the other person’s position, giving [him] her what [he] she wants and needs. In short, it’s not about you.”¹¹ This is enormously valuable practical advice. It is what works. And it is spot on — justifying our actions rather than repenting of them turns us into victims rather than offenders and that is delusional thinking.

How are we to obey the command in Luke 3:8 and Acts 26:20 to show/bring forth fruits worthy of repentance without first recognizing the need for this first and most basic requirement? These scriptures seem to say that true repentance is evident and visible, as the person displays a changed heart and an obvious desire to make things right. We must not lose sight of this in our rapidly changing world. We have been given guidelines: *there will be fruit* — fruit that is consistent with repentance. “Therefore produce fruit that proves your repentance” (NET Bible).

“One of two things precedes forgiveness: the transgressor’s expression of remorse or the victim’s embrace of life after damage.”¹² Hax and others maintain that there are two paths after a serious transgression occurs; either the transgressor is seriously remorseful (moral disgust at his own actions), or absence of remorse and justification or playing the victim. Note that in the first scenario, the one damaged is invited to interact by virtue of the repentance of the other. Lives can be rebuilt and trust regained. In the second case the victim has no choice except to embrace life after damage. It is imperative that growth happens or this injury will steal joy, rule the spirit, and possibly devastate the future. God wastes nothing, not even pain, and His brilliant principle of bringing good out of evil will defeat an ugly situation.

Shabby Chic?

There is something beautiful about making amends. One cannot do it alone, and one does not desire justice *in order* to place blame on others but *so that* one can make amends. As stated earlier, it is an exchange between two people bound together by a violation. Without repentance, one holds up the reconciliation process; no resolution, no peace. Shabby chic is very popular in decorating, but in relationships and before God, I think not.

The Amish practice forgiveness by welcoming back a straying member, but always after confession. And the Jewish Day of Atonement is central to confession and repentance. **Forgiveness implies the other party has already confessed to a sin.** Or this is what used to be the case. It is being altered and redefined. But is there any refuge or escape from confession? Would the story of the prodigal son be a part of Scripture had he not repented? (Note that the father did not even allow the son to finish his repentance before he forgave him, so eager he was to forgive. And so should we be *eager* to forgive and praying constantly toward that end.) The very compassion and mercy which have been extended to us — we must extend to others.

We hear much about closure and how important it is. It is repentance which can bring closure. The word repentance actually means change and it is knowledge of that change of heart which allows friendship to be rekindled. A wife would be considered foolish if she were to forgive her husband of adultery while he was still engaging in it. It is only after the changing of his ways and the seeking of forgiveness that it can even be considered. Until there is repentance, the offense is ongoing.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Carolyn Hax, columnist, *Washington Post*.

We are all aware of heroic cases of forgiveness, when, for example, a little child has been murdered and the parent says that he forgives the murderer. It is not my intent to take anything away from these astonishing acts in any way. However, that is not the focus of this inquiry. There are amazing resources available to help one with forgiveness: research councils, organizations devoted to help, a myriad of books and counseling materials. Forgiveness is a blessed action, an awesome and beautiful thing. We are allowed no revenge, no grudges, no bitterness. We shouldn't even keep a record of the wrongs we suffered. We are not to hold on to hurts and wrongs. In fact, to be governed by the offenses done to one can be the very bait of Satan. I can think of no example, however, when a parent would sit down with the one who murdered their child *if* the murderer still harbored that intention in his heart.

There are two exceptions in Scripture where repentance is not specifically mentioned. Luke 23:34: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." And in Acts 7:60 Stephen asks that those stoning him be forgiven. Neither Jesus nor Stephen were overriding God's directive to repent and the ones in these passages will have to repent as well. To say that those in question need not repent is unthinkable according to the scriptural prerequisites.

Repentance is Clean-up

We are given the brilliant formula for achieving forgiveness in Matthew 6:12: "Forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us." And we also know that there is no end to our forgiving when our brother repents with the illustration of the seventy times seven model (Luke 17:4; Matt. 18:21). We know that it was wicked of the servant in Matthew 18:28-33 not to forgive when he was asked. *But Biblically forgiveness always implies repentance.* "If another believer sins, rebuke him; then if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3-4). To think that one is being generous or loving by ignoring repentance would be like building on top of the devastation after a tornado, without clean-up. Repentance is clean-up.

As in nature, soil must be broken before it can produce a crop; grapes must be crushed before they can produce wine; clouds must burst before rain can come — so there are conditions which must be met when harm has been done. We must allow the LORD to define those terms.

One of the most effective prayers we can pray is to ask our Father to show us our sins, in order that we might repent of them. As with beautiful music, our ears require it to end on the right note; so too with conflict and peace. So too, our God has a requirement: "If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, my LORD would not have listened" (Ps. 66:18).

When we follow the Biblical model and petition the throne room of heaven, we are assured of forgiveness. How totally remarkable that God forgives, and even *forgets* our sins, that what He remembers is the blood of His Son which enabled us to be forgiven.¹³ May our walk honor the One who made this possible and the Son who sacrificed his life so that we could be forgiven.

¹³ Janie B. Cheaney, "Into the Depths of the Sea," *World*, Apr. 7, 2012.