

Class Objective: To refine our faith and understanding by dismantling misconceptions regarding God, the Bible and the Christian life.

Class Overview

1. Introduce *Urban Legends of Theology* by Michael Wittmer
2. Clarify the meaning of the term urban legend as used in this class
3. Understand the degree of personal impact connected with various misconceptions
4. Elevate the pursuit of truth as the ultimate goal of analyzing error
5. Emphasize edification as the primary purpose of this study
6. Explore the following misconceptions in light of biblical truth:
 - a. The name of the Son of God is Jesus.
 - b. Unbelievers are annihilated in hell.
 - c. Justification means “just as if I had never sinned.”
 - d. We should forgive others for our own good.
 - e. Christianity is not a religion—it’s a relationship.
 - f. I don’t need church to have a relationship with God.

Notes

Urban legend: We should forgive others for our own good.

I. The statement being addressed in this study raises the question of motivation in the matter of forgiveness.

Should our own physical, emotional and spiritual wellness be the primary motive for forgiving others.

A. A word about human motives.

1. Human motives are never singular in nature.
2. Our motives are best understood (at least in theory) from the standpoint of a hierarchical structure (primary, secondary, tertiary etc.).
3. The actual order of our motives at any given moment may vary and the accuracy of our perception of that order may, as well, be more or less clear.

II. Many suggest that the reason we should forgive others is for our own sake.

A. Anne Lamott argues that we would be much happier if we let go and forgave the person who wronged us. She cites a wise saying, “Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and waiting for the rat to die.”

B. Oprah Winfrey describes forgiveness as “letting go so that the past does not hold you prisoner, does not hold you hostage.”

C. Nadia Bolz-Weber asserts, “I really believe that when someone does us harm, we’re connected to that mistreatment like a chain. . . . So what if forgiveness is actually a way of wielding bolt cutters and snapping the chain that links us. Like it is saying, ‘What you did was so not okay that I refuse to be connected to it anymore.’”

D. A 2022 article from the staff of the Mayo Clinic asks, “Who hasn’t been hurt by the actions or words of another? . . . These wounds can leave lasting feelings of resentment, bitterness and anger — sometimes even hatred. But if you hold on to that pain, you might be the one who pays most dearly. By embracing forgiveness, you also can embrace peace and hope. Consider how forgiveness can lead you down the path of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being.” The article goes on to list several benefits of forgiveness:

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| 1. Healthier relationships. | 5. Lower blood pressure. |
| 2. Improved mental health. | 6. A stronger immune system. |
| 3. Less anxiety, stress & hostility. | 7. Improved heart health. |
| 4. Fewer symptoms of depression. | 8. Improved self-esteem. |

III. However, nowhere in the Bible do we find forgiveness directly advised as something to be done primarily for the sake of one's self. Rather, forgiveness is to be rendered as an act of obedience to God reflecting both his character and his grace in forgiving us.

A. ⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Matthew 5:43-45

B. ²¹ Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" ²² Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times. ²³ "Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴ When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. ²⁵ And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. ²⁶ So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' ²⁷ And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸ But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' ²⁹ So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' ³⁰ He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. ³¹ When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. ³² Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³ And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart." Matthew 18:21-35

C. ³¹ Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³² Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Ephesians 4:31, 32

D. ¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Colossians 3:12, 13

IV. Though the forgiver, the forgiven, the church and the community at large benefit from the act of giving and receiving forgiveness, it is never set forward as the primary motive for resolving offenses.

A. One reason forgiveness is to have obedience to God as its primary motive may be to minimize our already intense tendency toward self-centeredness.

1. "... there is an insurmountable problem with making the benefits of forgiveness the reason for forgiveness. *Why is it hard to forgive?* Because we understandably focus on ourselves and the hurt we carry. The other person must pay. We will get our due. *Why must we forgive?* For our own sake to reclaim our power and freedom. Do you see the problem? The self is the reason we do not forgive, and the self is the reason we must forgive. How is this supposed to work? If focusing on me is the obstacle of forgiveness, how is focusing on me also the answer. Am I not digging my hole deeper? If the reason I forgive is to break your power over me or to put you in the rearview mirror, am I not still fighting with you? This 'forgiveness' looks like another defensive move, dressed in its Sunday best but aimed at shoving you away. How can I forgive you when I am thinking mostly, or only, of me? M. Wittmer

V. The needs of others and the well-being of the community appear to be implicit secondary priorities for pursuing forgiveness even as the will of God is affirmed as the primary motive.

A. The Bible commends and advocates peace and harmony in the church and among all people.

1. First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. ³This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior. 1 Tim. 2:1-3

a) We are exhorted to pray for a peaceful society, an environment that pleases God. By implication this must preclude the vengefulness inherent in unforgiveness.

2. ¹⁸Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. ¹⁹For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. ²⁰For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. ²¹For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²²He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³When 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 Peter 2:18-22

a) Suffering unjustly, the very kind of thing we struggle to forgive, when endured, meets God's approval. It is considered to be our calling as a manifestation of following Jesus' example of not retaliating but instead trusting in the justice of God.

3. . . . ²complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Philippians 2:2-8

a) Replicating the mind (attitude of obedient, humble servanthood) of Jesus (5) facilitates unity within the church (2). Note that Jesus' service is an act of obedience to God (8). Paul says the motive of this service is not to arise from "selfish ambition" but considers the needs of others to be of greater importance (3). This suggests a God-centered motive that acts in the interest of others.

4. ¹⁵See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. 1 Thessalonians 5:15

a) In Paul's admonition against vengeance, he makes the good of others a priority.

VI. Notwithstanding the biblical emphasis on obedience to God and the good of others, the Bible does not discourage believers from acting in their best interest and, in fact, always has our best interest in view in all that it commands.

A. In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Acts 20:35

1. All the directives of Scripture have as their ultimate goal God's glory and our joy. Here Paul, through the words of Jesus, is exhorting believers to seek their highest good in obedience to God.
2. Therefore, seeking the many benefits of forgiveness for oneself could never be said to be wrong as long as that pursuit finds its proper place after the priority of obedience to God and the good of others.

VII. Some thoughts on Forgiveness (*Vaneetha Risner*)

A. What forgiveness is.

1. To forgive is to surrender the right to hurt others in response to the way they've hurt us. Forgiveness means refusing to retaliate or hold bitterness against people for the ways they have wounded us. It is a unilateral act — not conditional on the person being repentant or even willing to acknowledge what they've done.

B. What forgiveness is not.

1. Forgiveness is not saying that sin doesn't matter. It is not approving of what the other person has done, minimizing the offense, or denying we've been wronged. Forgiveness is acknowledging that the other person has sinned against us and may never be able to make it right.
2. Forgiveness doesn't always mean reconciliation or restoration. And it does not require restoring trust or inviting the people who hurt us back into a relationship. Forgiveness is unconditional, but meaningful reconciliation and restoration are conditional (in the gospel and in human relationships) on the offender's genuine repentance, humble willingness to accept the consequences of his actions, and a desire by both parties to work on the relationship.

C. Forgiveness is costly.

1. In the Bible, it involves shedding blood (Hebrews 9:22). Sacrifice. Death. Honestly, the first step of forgiveness still often feels like death. I want to cling to my right to be angry and often resent being asked to give that up. It all seems so unfair. My flesh still demands some type of retribution.

D. Forgiveness is more than a decision.

1. For most offenses, forgiveness is both an initial decision to let go of bitterness as well as a long, ongoing process. When offenses come to mind and painful memories resurface, I must intentionally stop rehearsing them and ask the Lord to help me release those thoughts and practice forgiveness.

E. Forgiveness Is Vital to Joy.

1. Forgiving those who have hurt us sets us free. It keeps bitterness from taking root, bitterness that would defile us and everyone around us (Ephesians 4:31). When we cling to resentment, we unknowingly give our offender ongoing power over our hearts, which keeps us enslaved to our anger. This prison we have created pulls us away from our Lord because we cannot hold on to bitterness and hold on to God. Correspondingly, forgiving those who have wronged us releases the hold of bitterness on us. God, who has forgiven our enormous debt, gives us the power to forgive others. It is his power, not ours. This is the miracle of Christian forgiveness: when we forgive, Christ does something profound in us and for us.
2. Joy and sorrow often coexist, but joy and bitterness cannot. Bitterness and unforgiveness rob our lives of vitality, peace, and the refreshing joy of God's presence.

Resources:

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/forgiveness-the-hardest-and-most-life-changing-thing-we-can-do/>

<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/we-cannot-cling-to-bitterness-and-god>