

I Believe in God...But I Don't Want to Forgive

Welcome/Prayer

Foreword

This fall we have been looking at how we face the temptation to live as a *Christian Atheist*, as in, we act as though God doesn't exist as we go about our daily lives. The message of today's discussion guide explores the subject of forgiveness.

Introduction

When we withhold forgiveness, it isn't that we don't know we're supposed to extend it to others; it's usually that we've rationalized why *not* to do it. Jesus preached a message of love and demonstrated an attitude of forgiveness toward others. Accordingly, as His followers, we don't have an option when it comes to forgiving others. We must forgive others the way He first forgave us. However, because we say, "We believe in God," yet don't forgive, that makes us Christian atheists. To learn how to forgive others in the ways He forgives us, let's review the characteristics of God's forgiveness from the message.

Preparation

Read aloud two of the key scriptures related to today's message.

Colossians 3:13 (NLT)

Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others.

Ephesians 4:32 (CEB)

Be kind, compassionate, and forgiving to each other, in the same way God forgave you in Christ.

Break it Down

How does God forgive?

1) God does not forget what happens, but He chooses not to remember it.

It's likely you've heard someone say (or said this yourself), "I can forgive, but I can't forget." Forgiving someone does not equal forgetting the offense. Scripture teaches that forgiving is *choosing not to remember* the offense. (ref. Jeremiah 31:34b CEB) By certain dictionary definitions, one meaning of "remember" is "to recall to the mind with effort." In other words, not remembering means choosing not to make the effort to recall the offense; it means consciously putting it out of mind. This is true of God's character—He makes an intentional decision not to dwell on our sins and to move on. When we forgive in the same way, we choose not to remember.

1. What is the difference between forgetting and forgiving?
2. How can we choose not to remember a person's misdeeds?
3. What techniques can we use to aid us in this process?

2) God does not look for answers, but He gives the benefit of the doubt.

Whenever someone wrongs us, we oftentimes look for an explanation (e.g., Why would s/he lie about that? What's their motive? What do they hope to gain by saying that?) If you investigate God's

forgiveness in Scripture, you'll find one thing noticeably missing—a search for answers. God's forgiveness doesn't require us to provide adequate answers for our sins and wrongdoing.

1. Why aren't explanations satisfactory when someone has been hurt by another?
2. What (if anything) do you believe would be adequate justification for your sins and transgressions? Explain.
3. Share some ways in which you could give an offender the benefit of the doubt.

3) God does not require conditions to be met, but He takes the initiative.

There are times that we offer "conditional" forgiveness (e.g., "I'll forgive you, BUT..." or "I'll forgive you IF...") instead of taking the initiative. What we should be doing is modeling what God does for us. The Apostle Paul explains God's character to the Colossians this way: "When you were dead in your sins...God forgave your sins and gave you new life through Christ." (Colossians 2:13 NLV). God doesn't wait for us to ask His forgiveness. He took the initiative and sent His Son, Jesus, into the world to pave the way for our forgiveness. We forgive others the way He forgave us when we don't put conditions on, but take the initiative in, offering forgiveness.

1. What are some "strings" we attach to offering forgiveness?
2. Describe a time when someone imposed conditions on you before s/he would forgive you. How did that make you feel, and what did you do as a result?

4) God does not remove all consequences, but He provides a new beginning.

Sometimes forgiving others might feel as though we're condoning the offense they committed against us. For example, we might believe that they should pay for their offenses before they're *deserving* of our forgiveness. While this way of thinking might seem fair/rational, we would be remiss if we did not heed the words of the prophet, Isaiah, when he said, "For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; it is he who will save us." (Isaiah 33:22 NIV) When God forgives, He removes the eternal consequences, but not the *earthly* ones. Not only that, with His forgiveness comes a new beginning. The New Testament word, "forgive," literally means "to release someone from a debt they owe." It means the slate is wiped clean, and a fresh start is given.

1. Share about a time that you received forgiveness but still suffered consequences of your wrongdoing.
2. How is trust a separate issue from forgiveness?
3. Describe a time when someone forgave you and provided you with a clean slate and new beginning.

Conclusion

Understanding how God forgives may help us overcome the Christian atheist tendency that causes us to say, "I believe in God, and I know what His word says; but, I just don't want to forgive." He shows us that we may never forget what happened, but we can choose not to remember it. The good news is that God helps us be able to say, "I believe in Him, and, because He's forgiven me, *even when I don't want to*, I'm willing to forgive others."

1. How does forgiveness demonstrate that we truly believe in God and are genuinely Christians?
2. Consider sharing the name/relationship to someone whom you need to forgive. What would it take for you to come to a place of forgiving that person?
3. Describe a time that you found freedom and peace in forgiving an offender.

Close in Prayer