

OpenTheo

#94 Forgiveness - Is there an unforgivable sin? Can I forfeit God's forgiveness?

December 2, 2021



Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Why don't we get a second chance at forgiveness when we die? Is God's forgiveness dependent on us forgiving others? Is blaspheming the Holy Spirit unforgivable?

· Support the show – give from the USA or Rest of the world (and get the show e-book) · For bonus content, the newsletter, prize draws and to ask a question sign up at www.askntwright.com · Exclusive podcast offers on Tom's books and videos from SPCK & NT Wright Online · Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast via your preferred podcast platform

Transcript

[Music] The #AskNTYanything podcast.

[Music] Hello and welcome back to the show. My regular sit-down with renowned New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright.

I'm Justin Briley from Premiere. And we're bringing you this program as ever in partnership with N.T. Wright online, and SBCK. Today talking about forgiveness, your questions include, "Is there in fact an unforgivable sin? Do we forfeit God's forgiveness?" If we don't forgive, Jesus had something to say about that on the Sermon the Mount.

Are we getting it right? And what about those who die without accepting Christ? Do they get a second chance at forgiveness? Thank you for everyone who's been leaving ratings and reviews of the podcast. A Hanover Five said, "It's a wonderful, encouraging podcast. We love listening to it."

My husband and I have greatly deepened our understanding of the gospel through listening. It's the podcast we didn't know we needed until we had it." Thank you both. Looking forward to your next episode.

Thank you so much. I love that phrase. The podcast we didn't know we needed until we

had it.

If you enjoy the podcast, do feel free to rate and review. It helps others to discover us. If you want more from the show, as ever, you can get it at AskNTRight.com. Time to get into this week's episode.

Today on the show, we're taking your questions on forgiveness. We've got questions here from Erin, Sam and Fiona in various parts of the world. I don't know if you've ever struggled with forgiveness.

Tom, I remember, well, my grandfather, he wrote a memoir about his time as a prisoner of war. He went on to become actually a Church of England minister because of his experiences under the Japanese. He talked about the barrier that he had for many years after the war towards Japanese people and really struggled with bitterness in his heart.

But it was really God's help that allowed him to come to a place of forgiveness ultimately towards the Japanese. Ironically, he went on to become a missionary serving in the Far East. There were many Japanese under his pastoral care in the end.

It was one of those ironic stories. But yes, forgiveness is a huge one for many people, isn't it, Tom? Yes, it is. Curious, I didn't know that about your grandfather.

My father was a prisoner of war for five years under the Germans. I'd never heard him discuss pro-Acon about forgiveness, though there would have been a huge amount to forgive. But in his, I think, 50s, so like 30 years later after that experience, he and my mother went and had one or two holidays in Germany and went around and visited some of the places, some of the castles and so on, where he'd been imprisoned.

And I think that was kind of a reconciliation. You can look the demons in the face as it were. And then he had business contacts who were Germans, and he actually made friends with them.

And I think for him, that was a way of reaching out and saying, "I'm just not going to hold it against you as a whole lot." But my father was a devout practicing Anglican in a very quiet, understated way, but very definite. And I think he was probably just working all that through. My own sense is that, yes, forgiveness is mandatory and yes, forgiveness is hard.

And sometimes it can sort of sneak up on you. There are times when I have been deeply hurt by somebody and have felt I'll never be able to forgive this person. And then a year or two down the road, when I've met them in some other context, I've been perfectly happy and friendly with them, and only later I've realized, "Oh my goodness, I seem to have forgiven them." And I think that simply that as one is praying for them, and as one is holding one's own sense of resentment in the presence of God and asking for healing, then sometimes that can happen quite deep down and we discover that it has happened.

Sometimes it takes a deliberate act of will in which we say to ourselves and in God's presence, "I can't promise that I will like this person because that may just not happen, but I am not going to hold against them what they did. I'm not going to treat them any differently as I would have if they hadn't done this." And that act of will can create a context within which actually much more positive emotions can spring up, and we might actually discover that there are things about them we do like and we do get on with them again. At the same time, if somebody say had persistently been dishonest in business dealings or something and cheated me out of a lot of money, that hasn't happened to me but supposing it did, then forgiveness might mean I mustn't hold it against them.

It probably wouldn't mean I must reestablish a business relationship with them, because that may just be that this is a deep problem that they have and it would be unwise for me just to jump back into that one again. And so there are matters of discernment there. Would that mean I wasn't forgiving them? No, I don't think it would.

I think I could forgive them, but simply say it would be wise not to go that route again. And likewise with other more sort of pathological conditions. Absolutely.

Well, this is all helpful introductory sort of preamble really to some of these questions that have come in. I'll start actually with Sam's question in British Columbia in Vancouver, who wants to know, I've got a deep regard for the Sermon on the Mount and its teachings, but I've always been hung up by chapter 6 verse 15, but if you do not forgive others, their trespasses neither will your father forgive your trespasses. Is God's forgiveness really contingent on our actions between each other? And of course this comes to some extent in the Lord's Prayer, forgive us our sins as we've given those who sin against us.

Is there some kind of give and take on this when it comes to God's forgiveness? Isn't that interesting? And yes, that's the one bit of the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus takes time to explain immediately afterwards in Matthew chapter 6, which I've always been fascinated by. There's lots of other things in the Lord's Prayer. Why doesn't he explain a bit more about give us this day our daily bread? You're going to need this and so make sure you pray about it.

No, it's the forgiveness one. And in order to see Father to explain, deliver us from evil. So it is fascinating that he seems to want to rub that in.

I think the first thing to say is that Jesus is inaugurating God's kingdom on earth as in heaven, and God's kingdom, God's sovereign rule on earth as in heaven, is all about forgiveness and reconciliation and healing. It's about the return from exile. It's about all that stuff in Isaiah 40 to 55 and so on.

And if somebody wants to be a part of this great new movement, this kingdom of God on

earth as in heaven, but wants to say, but actually I'm not going to forgive this person or that person, then they're saying, I want to be part of this, but I don't want to be part of it. In other words, it isn't that God is saying, by the way, there's a few boxes you've got to tick here. This is organically what the whole business is about.

This is a kingdom of forgiveness. And if you say, I want to be part of the kingdom of forgiveness, but I don't want to be part of the kingdom of forgiveness, then you're talking nonsense. The other place this comes is, of course, Matthew 18, that very worrying parable about the servant who owes the master a fantastically large debt and the master forgives him, and the servant promptly goes out and tries to throttle somebody who owes him a few small coins.

And the master hears about it and says, no, this doesn't work like that. And then at the end, it says, "Scarily, so will my heavenly Father deal with you if you do not each forgive your brother from your heart." And we should say in the light of earlier conversations, your brother and your sister, what I think is going on is this. We all have, as it were, and this is very metaphorical, a kind of gateway in our innermost heart and mind and soul, not a soul in a platonic sense, either.

In our insideist inside, we have a gateway which can open up to receive God's love and forgiveness. And it's the same gateway which opens up to give love and forgiveness to others. And if we decide to shut that gate so that we are not giving love and forgiveness to others, we cannot receive the love and forgiveness of God.

It's the same gate. And so it isn't a matter of if you don't tick this box, God won't tick that box. It's a matter of sort of organically true, that if you're a person of forgiveness, then you're a person of forgiveness.

And if you're a person of non-forgiveness, then you're saying, "I don't want to believe in forgiveness," which means I'm not having God's forgiveness either. And so I think it's something to do with the deep recesses of our personalities about being forgiveness people or not. Another question on forgiveness.

And this refers to a well-known verse that has troubled many people down the centuries in Matthew 12, but Fiona in New Zealand in Christchurch says, "Help, firstly, there are many parts of Scripture I wrestle with. And while I'm usually happy to fall back on, lean not on your own understanding, etc., I'm having trouble to do that with Matthew 12 verse 32, where it says, "People will be forgiven for every sin and blasphemy, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven." Surely there are no exceptions to what can be forgiven, and your thoughts would be appreciated. Okay, this is sort of a classic question that comes up in relation to forgiveness.

Is there the so-called unforgivable sin of black-seeming against the Holy Spirit? What do you make of this song? There's two immediate things to say. One is the context that the

context there is about people who are saying that Jesus himself was demon-possessed. And this is a charge which was brought against Jesus because Jesus was doing extraordinary things and people who didn't want to believe his message about God's kingdom coming on earth is in heaven.

Even though they saw that he was doing amazing healings and so on, they said, "It must be because he's in league with Beelzebel, and he casts out demons by the Prince of Demons." Matthew's reader knows, like Marx and Luke's and John's reader know, that Jesus was specially equipped by the Holy Spirit for the particular ministry that he had. That's very clear at the start of each of the gospels in the baptism and then in the Manifesto in Luke chapter 4, where Jesus quotes Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is a point me. He's anointed me to do this and that and the other." And the point is that the people who are accusing Jesus are looking at the work of the Holy Spirit in and through him and saying, "That is the work of the devil." In other words, that is the very specific thing which Jesus is warning against.

Then if you look at the work of the Holy Spirit and say, "That's the work of the devil," then as I said in the answer to the previous question, you are slamming the door on any possibility that the love and forgiveness of the Holy Spirit will reach you. You're saying, "We don't want that. Thank you very much." So it's as if it were technically unforgivable, not because there's a sliding scale of potential forgiveness, and this one happens to fall off the end of it, O dear, but rather because if you look at the work of God the Holy Spirit and say, "That must be the work of the devil," then there is literally no hope because the hope comes in precisely the work of the Holy Spirit, which you have just not only denied but blasphemed, you've bad mouths.

You've said that God's work is in fact the devil's work. So that's the kind of contextual answer. And I suspect that very few people who now piously ask this question in churches have ever had the slightest intention of looking at something which is going on, which is the work of God's Spirit and said it's the work of the devil.

Sadly, that does sometimes happen when people are, say, wonderfully healed in churches which have taught for years that healing does not happen today. I know one or two instances where people have been, I would say, miraculously wonderfully healed where people in their churches who simply don't believe that's possible have said, "This must be the work of the devil," where they've sometimes even cast them out of church because they're obviously demon-possessed. That seems to me a very, very serious issue and I would apply Matthew 12 to something like that.

The short answer which you just must have heard many times and I certainly have is that if you're worried about having committed the unforgivable sin, it's obvious that you haven't committed it because if you had committed it, you wouldn't be worried about it. That may sound a kind of a cheap and cheerful response but actually it's true. It's true

because you would only be worried about it, be worried about sinning and its consequences if the Spirit were working in you.

It seems to me look at the context, be refreshed, be comforted that yes, it sounds a strange thing to say but in context it actually makes a lot of sense. Final question then and this is more about forgiveness post-mortem as it were and it's a question from Erin in North Carolina who says, "My boyfriend is a new Christian, the only Christian in his family at this time." As we've been praying for his family members to also come to know Jesus and thinking about the resurrection to come, he's been wondering why death is as it were the deadline to be saved and begin a relationship with God. I realize I only have guesses at how to answer him and we both like to know with more certainty.

So essentially this question sort of, well, is there a second chance for forgiveness? Why is death the cut-off point? I mean this takes us into all kinds of other territories potentially here, talking about the nature of salvation and so on but any brief thoughts at least for Erin and her boyfriend. Yes, in the New Testament salvation is so closely joined with believing the gospel and the gospel is very much about here we are in this world. God is renewing this world.

Here is the offer of the gospel. Here is Jesus. Are you going to turn away from it or go on worshipping idols or not? We have no promises whatever of second chances after death in the New Testament.

So if you're starting with the New Testament, it really looks all the way through as though here is Jesus, we should be so lucky to have the chance to know God through Jesus. If we then look at that and say, "Not for me, thanks," then we are saying, "Not for me, thanks." Of course that raises the question what about all the people either before the time of Jesus or in the present day who have never heard of Jesus or who have only heard the name of Jesus used as a swear word or in violent or abusive or whatever contexts which would be totally antithetical to who Jesus actually was and is and what his message is all about. When we come upon those sort of situations, I think the New Testament simply says to us, "God is sovereign, God is gracious, God is merciful, God will do the right thing." And that sense of, "Actually it isn't my business to sort this one out.

It is ultimately God's business." But saying that doesn't as it were let us off the hook and think, "Oh, well, it doesn't matter because once I'm dead, then God has many other ways of trying to persuade me to work." We are not told anything about that. This does, as you said, get us into all sorts of mysterious areas. C.S. Lewis wrestled with this one quite a lot.

And though he was not a universalist, he was greatly attracted by the work of George MacDonald, who probably was, and in C.S. Lewis's book, *The Great Divorce*, he does seem to be finding a way of saying that actually maybe even in the moment of death or thereafter, maybe it's as though things which weren't quite clear before can now be

made a bit more clear. That doesn't necessarily mean that everyone says, "Oh yes, I see, I'm up for this." But it was his way of just gently exploring an area about which we are not told very much. I think there is a problem when people associate salvation with a very explicit and articulated faith, which of course would be the norm.

In St. John or Paul, blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, etc. And for Paul, those who justified them, who also glorified or justified by faith, so don't expect to be glorified if you haven't had that faith, etc. All that is true, and yet there is a sense of shall not the judge of all the earth do right.

There is a sense in Romans 2, Romans 2, 1 to 16, that God will judge all in a totally just and right way. And the God who is going to do that is the God we know in Jesus and by the Spirit. So I have never been a universalist, but as I look at the questions of what we know and what we don't know about God's ways with the world, I want to say it is a matter of trust, it is a matter of leaving to God questions which we are not qualified or capable of answering ourselves.

Well, I hope that's helped you, Erin, and we don't claim to be capable of answering all questions fully. We get an awful lot of them, but we hope that this has been helpful in some way. Yeah, great stuff.

Thank you very much, Tom, for your answers on these questions of forgiveness and the unforgivable sin and that sort of thing. And we'll be back with more questions next time. Thank you for being with us this week.

Next time we're asking, did it really happen? We've got questions from listeners on the historical scholarship that sometimes seems to undermine the credibility of biblical events. And we're asking, did accounts of early Christian persecution get exaggerated? So your questions on those kinds of issues next time. Don't forget that our show partner, NT Right Online, are offering a free e-book from Tom on the Book of Acts for podcast listeners.

There's a link to that in today's show notes. And as usual links to askNT Right.com where you can sign up for more from the show and you can support us from there as well. We've got an e-book we'd love to send you if you're able to do that.

For now, thanks for being with us and see you next time.

[Music]

(buzzing)