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Forgive and Forget

by Bryan Hodge

“Forgive and forget,” we are told. These words are repeated as if they are a direct quotation from the Bible.

More than once, I have heard someone say, “I forgive but sometimes I have a difficult time forgetting.” Willie Nelson sings “Forgiving you was easy/But forgetting seems to take the longest time.” Should one feel guilty if he has not forgotten? Are forgiving and forgetting things which necessarily go together? Is one commanded to forget? What does the Bible say?

First of all, let us not confuse the idea of forgiving and forgetting (in an absolute sense). (a) There is a sense in which God does not remember sins (Jer. 31:34; Heb. 8:12; Heb. 10:17). The context concerns the forgiveness offered through the blood of Christ. No yearly sacrifice is required (Heb. 10:1-4). Sin is fully atoned for, and covered. Guilt is completely removed. One has pardon. (b) However, God does not in the absolute sense forget. David’s sin with Bathsheba is mentioned after he was forgiven (1 Kings 15:5 cf. 2 Sam. 12:13-14). Peter’s sins and Paul’s also are pointed out after they were forgiven (Mt. 27:69-75; Mk. 14:66-72; Lk. 22:54-62; Jn. 18:15-18, 25-27; Acts 8:1-3; Acts 9:1-2; Gal. 2:11-ff). These sins are recorded by inspiration to teach, warn and encourage (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11-12; 1 Tim. 1:15).

Second, the brains capacity to remember is amazing. The memory capacity is estimated at “2.5 petabytes (or million-gigabytes). For comparison if the brain worked like a digital video recorder in a television, 2.5 petabytes would be enough to hold three million hours of T.V. shows. You would have to leave the T.V. running continuously for 300 years to use up the storage” (scientificamerican.com/articlecfm?id=what-is-the-memory-capacity). “It has been argued that we have enough space in our LTM (Long Term Memory) to memorize every phone number in the U.S. and still function normally in terms of remembering what we do now” (allpsych.com/psychology.101/memory). Unlike a computer, one cannot simply hit delete. “There are many reasons we forget ... some information never makes it to the LTM ... other reasons include decay, which means that information that is not used for an extended period of time decays or fades ... it is possible that we are physiologically programmed to eventually erase data that no longer appears pertinent to us ... failing to remember something doesn’t mean the information is gone forever though. This could be caused by distractions going on around us or possibly due to error of association.

There is the phenomenon of repression which means we purposely (albeit subconsciously) push a memory out of reach because we do not want to remember the associated feelings. This is often cited where adults ‘forget’ incidences of sexual abuse when they were children. And finally, amnesia, which can be psychological or physiological in origin” (ibid). Note: I do not know whether the above statements are entirely accurate. However, I do know that in a normal healthy brain forgetting is not as easy as some might think. It is not as easy as pressing a delete button.

Third, forgiveness does not necessarily remove consequences (cf. 2 Sam. 12:10-14; Acts 26:11; Phile.). A drunk, a fornicator, a drug addict, a thief, a murderer, etc.—may be forgiven and yet still face health issues or criminal punishment.

A child molester may be forgiven. Yet it would be foolish to entrust him with a class of children by himself. Think of the appearance (2 Cor. 8:21). Think of the potential temptation you would be placing that man (Mt. 6:13; Rom. 14:21).

An embezzler (such as Bernie Madoff or Charles Penzi) could repent and be forgiven. However, would you make them the church treasurer? I wouldn't for the very reasons provided in the previous paragraph.

The Bible does not teach that we are required to forget. In some cases it would be foolish to completely forget. I do not think one should feel guilty for remembering.

The Bible does require that we forgive (Mt. 6:12, 14-15; Mt. 18:21-35; Lk. 17:3-4; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). When someone says, “I will forgive, but I won't forget,” it is possible that what he means is “I will say I forgive but will not really forgive.” Here is a test to help see if one has truly forgiven— (1) Do I fellowship the one who has repented? (2) Do I avoid them, seeing only when I must? (3) Do I meditate upon the wrongdoing? (4) Does it eat at me? (5) Do I secretly enjoy hearing about their misfortunes? (Note: This should not be the case even if they have not repented (cf. Prov. 24:17-18; 1 Cor. 13).