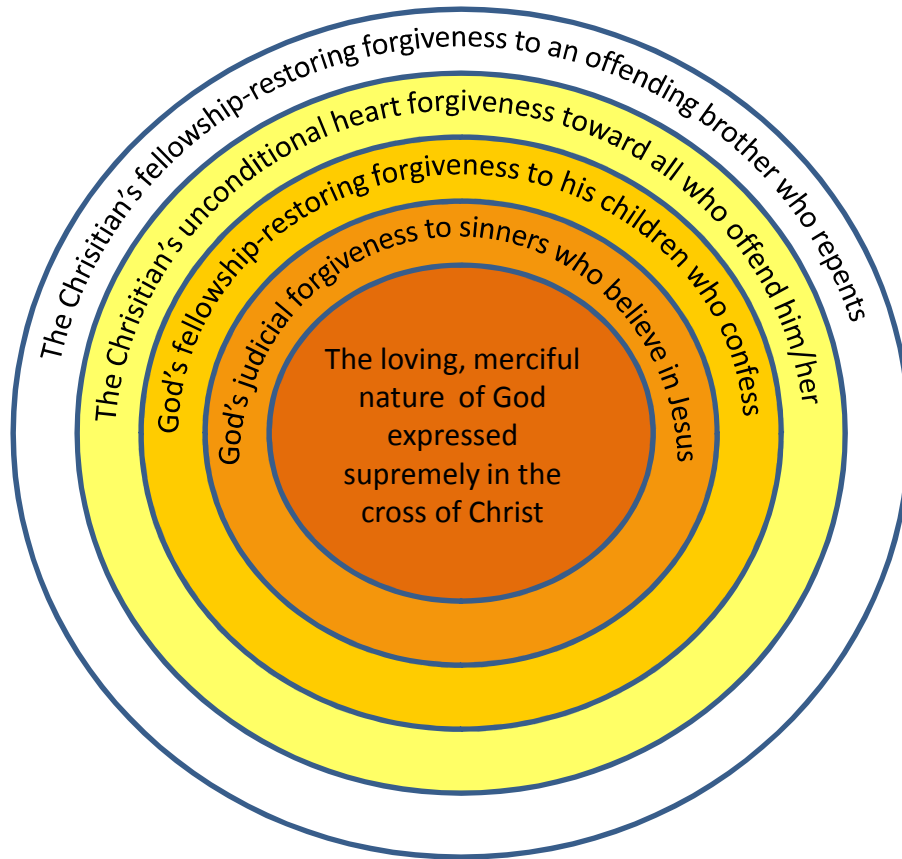


The Circles of Forgiveness

The loving, merciful, unifying aspects of divine forgiveness



The Inner Circles: God to Man. God is gracious, merciful, and generous in His forgiveness through Jesus Christ (Eph 1:7). There are two aspects of God's forgiveness: judicial and fellowship-restoring. In judicial forgiveness, God grants the sinner who believes in Jesus eternal life (Jn 3:16; Rom 4:4-5). In fellowship-restoring forgiveness, God restores communion with a child of His who confesses his/her sins to Him (1Jn 1:9; 1Cor 11:31-32). Judicial forgiveness establishes a person's *standing* as a child of God. Fellowship-restoring forgiveness affects the daily *state* of the child of God.

The Outer Circles: Man to Man. God's forgiveness is the foundation and source of all human forgiveness, albeit Christians, having been forgiven by God, have a greater capacity and duty to forgive than unbelievers (Col 2:13; Matt 18:21-35). There are two aspects of Christians' forgiveness of others: unconditional heart forgiveness and fellowship-restoring forgiveness. Christians are commanded to unconditionally forgive all who offend them (believer or unbeliever) by putting away all bitterness, anger, and revenge (Mk 11:25; Eph 4:31-32). God calls Christians to a high, Christ-like standard of love toward each other (Jn 15:12; 1Pet 1:22). Therefore, when one believer wrongs another believer, the offended believer is to rebuke his brother. If his brother repents, he is to forgive him (Luke 17:3-4; Matt 18:15-17). Christ-like forgiveness flows from a loving, merciful attitude that seeks peace and reconciliation; but reconciliation and relational closeness require responsible actions from both parties involved (Luke 17:3-4; Matt 5:23-24). When reconciliation is not possible or prudent, God nonetheless calls us to peace (Rom 12:17-21; 1Cor 7:15).