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“Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32).

Forgiven and Forgiving

Central Truth: Forgive others as you have been forgiven.

L181; Date: February 1995. **Text:** Matthew 6:14-15; 18-22; Luke 23:33-34; Ephesians 4:30-32. **Topic:** Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a basic Bible doctrine. There are seven words in Scripture which denote forgiveness, three in Hebrew and four in Greek. The basic idea of forgiveness is to take away, to bear away, to send away, or to release by letting go. God describes forgiveness in statements like this: “*Their sins and iniquities will I remember no more*” (Hebrews 10:17). The same words are used in reference to God forgiving us and our forgiving one another. That indicates we are to practice “*forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven [us]*” (Ephesians 4:32).

One of the seven petitions of the Model Prayer reads, “*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*” (Matthew 6:12). It is an indication that our forgiving one another is vitally related to our being forgiven by God. In conversion He removes our past sins, makes us new in Christ, gives us His indwelling Spirit, and spreads His love in our hearts. Thus we are enabled to forgive because we have been forgiven.

Forgiveness Is Demanded (Matthew 6,14, 15)

Jesus lays down the demand very clearly: “If you forgive, God will forgive you. If you do not forgive others, God will not forgive you.” That is a clear command for us to be forgiving.

Christian forgiveness is an act of grace. A footnote in *The Scofield Reference Bible* says, “This is legal ground.” Therefore, the implication is that it does not apply to Christians. But it does. If Christians are not to offer

this petition in the Model Prayer, how can they offer any of the other petitions? The forgiveness here does not relate to salvation but to fellowship with God. As God forgave you on the basis of grace, so you must forgive others in grace.

Christian forgiveness is based on relationship with God. Why does God not forgive if you do not forgive? (1) You are commanded to forgive other people (Mark 11:25). (2) Your failure to forgive another is a sin of disobedience to God (James 4:17). (3) Unconfessed sin in your life makes prayer impossible (Psalm 66:18), and the sin will remain until it is confessed and forgiven (I John 1:9).

Suppose a man prays, “Lord, I need Your forgiveness. Please forgive me of every sin except adultery. I fully intend to go on in that practice, but please forgive everything else.” Will God hear that prayer? Of course not. Why not? The man is not dealing honestly with his sin. But substitute the words bitterness or failure to forgive in the place of adultery and you have the same problem. You cannot have fellowship with God without a forgiving spirit toward your peers.

Forgiveness Is Expanded (Matthew 18:21-35)

Jesus knew His demand for a forgiving spirit in us would be difficult for us to accept. So He dealt with the issue on several occasions, even giving instructions on how the church should deal with a member who refused to be forgiving toward a fellow member.

Forgiveness is to be unlimited (verses 21, 22). Peter was going a long way in grace when he asked, “Lord, how often am I to forgive my brother, if he goes on wronging me? Would seven times be enough?” Before you condemn Peter for so small a number, think how difficult it is to truly forgive two or three times. Seven times is going a long way. But Jesus went further saying, “No, not seven times; but seventy times seven times.” That does not mean to keep a count and forgive up to 490 times, then you are free to do what you will on the 491st time. Not at all. It rather means that forgiveness is to be unlimited, even seven times in a day (Luke 17:4). Keep on forgiving and don’t keep count. Keeping count might indicate that you are not truly forgiving.

Forgiveness is based on being forgiven (verses 23-30). Jesus illustrated the principle with a story. A man owned millions of dollars, which he was unable to pay. He asked for an extension of the loan so that he might have more time to pay. To his amazement, the creditor forgave the entire amount. Then the man whose debt had been forgiven went to a man

who owed him only a few dollars but was unable to pay. He refused to extend the loan and had the man cast into a debtor's prison. The first creditor called him a "wicked servant," saying, "I canceled your debt because you asked me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow as I had mercy on you?" Jesus was teaching that you are to forgive others after the same manner as He forgave you. Are you doing it?

The failure to forgive calls for judgment (verses 31-35). The unforgiving debtor was cast into a debtor's prison, just as he treated his associated who owed him some money. He would stay there until he paid back all he owed. That is terrible, but something here is worse than that. Jesus said, "*So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses*" (Matthew 18:35). Do not try to explain away that warning. It agrees fully with James 2:13, "*He shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy.*" On another occasion Jesus said, "*Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy*" (Matthew 5:7). The principle is clear: be forgiving or face the certain discipline of God.

Forgiveness Is Demonstrated (Luke 23:33, 34)

One of the greatest demonstrations of a forgiving spirit is seen in Jesus on the cross. Look at the crowd surrounding Him and hear His prayer: "*Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34). That teaches three things about the grace of forgiveness.

Forgive those who are the cause of your suffering. Around the cross were those who plotted Jesus' death. There were those who cried with the mob, "*Crucify him, crucify him*" (Luke 23:21). There were people who had come to see a crucifixion and who offered no sympathy for Him. There were the Roman soldiers whose duty was to nail Him to the cross. And He asked the Father to forgive them all. Amazing grace! Stephen followed Jesus' example and prayed for those who killed him (Acts 7:60). And you can have the same grace when you suffer.

Forgive those who do not ask for it. Do not say, "I will forgive him if he will ask me to." But no one asked Jesus. He forgave them while they were in the very act of crucifying Him. If you wait until an offender asks you to forgive him, you will carry offenses all of your life. Forgive whether you are asked to or not. Keep the camel unloaded and you will never experience "the straw that broke the camel's back"!

Forgive as an act of grace. Jesus manifested grace in His prayer for forgiveness. But His grace is magnified when it is remembered that He was

suffering for them, and for us. He was dying for their sins at the very time they were sinning against Him by causing His death. That is a double expression of grace. Is the grace of God sufficient in you for you to be a forgiving person?

Forgiveness Is Related (Ephesians 4:30-32)

Read Ephesians 4:30-32 and note the companions of forgiveness. The list includes those graces we call the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22, 23).

Forgiveness is related to the Spirit. *“Grieve not the holy Spirit of God”* (verse 30). A bitter and unforgiving spirit grieves God's Holy Spirit. We must take care, for this is a most serious sin (Isaiah 7:13). To do “despite to the Spirit of grace” deserves God's strictest discipline (Hebrews 10:29). Every contact you have with God is by the Holy Spirit. To resist Him and grieve Him cuts off your fellowship with the Father and the Son. Sins against the Holy Spirit are most serious. Do not take it lightly when the Spirit prompts you to forgive another. He is grieved by your failure to forgive.

Forgiveness is related to your social contacts (verse 31, 32). Look at the list of social sins to be forsaken: bitterness, wrath, anger, railing, abusive language, and malice. Underlying each of them is a spirit that insists on its pleasures, refusing to forgive the offenses of another. Instead, *“Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love”* (Romans 12:10). *“If ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work”* (James 3:14-16). Be forgiving.

Forgiveness is related to the Savior (verse 32). You forgive others *“as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”* He forgives that you might be forgiving (Colossians 3:13). How did God forgive you? He forgave on the basis of grace, not merit. He forgave immediately, eternally, completely, and freely. Is that how you forgive those who have wronged you? To forgive *“as God . . . has forgiven you”* means to do so in the same manner and on the same basis. You can forgive the worst offense. You can forgive oft-repeated offenses. God did, and you can forgive as He has forgiven.

Forgiveness Is Examined (Colossians 3:12-14)

Look at the company it keeps (verse 12). Forgiveness lives in

fellowship with mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering, and forbearance. That is good company. Cultivate those graces in your life, and your capacity to forgive will grow.

Look at the relationship it inspires (verse 13). It enables you to bear with one another. Therefore, it cultivates fellowship in social and spiritual contacts. No one wants to be in the company of a bitter, unforgiving person. Such a spirit discolors all of life. But forgiveness permits good relationships.

Look at the example it emulates (verse 13). It puts you in company with Jesus Christ. He forgave. You forgive in the same manner and spirit. You and He become sharers in the unique experience of forgiving. You follow His example and become more like Him through your growth in grace.

Look at the spirit which motivates it (verse 14). It is called “*charity*” in the King James Version, but the word means “divine love.” The term is used in reference to God loving us (John 3:16), the love of God spread abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5), and our love to one another and to God (I John 4:20, 21). That is why we can forgive as He forgives.

Do not say, “I can forgive, but I cannot forget.” God does not require forgetfulness. He does require you to surrender the right to hold an offense against an offender ever again. When you make that commitment, you can remember without bitterness.

Here is the principle by which God would have us live: “*Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you*” (Ephesians 4:32).

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you define forgiveness?
2. How do you explain Matthew 6:12?
3. Why will God not forgive you when you are not forgiving?
4. What teaches that forgiveness must be unlimited?
5. How did Jesus demonstrate a forgiving spirit on the cross?
6. How can you manifest that same spirit in daily life?
7. Why does an unforgiving spirit grieve the Holy Spirit?
8. How can you forgive others as Christ has forgiven you?
9. How is a forgiving spirit an expression of God's love in you?
10. How will you put this principle into your life this week?