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**“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,”** Matthew 6:12.

## **Be Forgiving**

**Lesson Aim:** To develop a forgiving spirit

**L266. Date:** April 1978. **Text:** Matthew 18:21-35.

**Topic:** Christ: Parables of; Forgiveness.

Matthew 18:21-35 is an embarrassing passage of Scripture. It shows man at his worst and strikes at his pride. Imagine anyone desiring to receive forgiveness while refusing to give forgiveness. That shows the extent of the depravity of the human spirit.

Each parable has one central message which it presents. The central message of Matthew 18:21-35 is this: HE WHO WOULD BE FORGIVEN MUST BE FORGIVING.

Some expositors of the Bible say that principle is too legalistic to apply to Christian conduct. A footnote in the Scofield Reference Bible states of the petition in the Model Prayer (“And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,” Matthew 6:12) that it is legal and Jewish, not for Christians to observe. Mr. Scofield is in error. The Christian must be forgiving in order to be forgiven. The principle is spiritual, not legalistic.

### I. DEFINITION OF FORGIVENESS

The Greek New Testament used the term **aphiemi**. It is translated “forgiveness” in the English language. The term properly means “to send away.”

**Aphiemi** is used in two ways in the New Testament which clarifies its meaning. (1) It is used to describe the separation of a man and wife and is translated “leave” and “put away” in the sense of divorce, I Corinthians 7:11-13. (2) It is used to describe the remission of a debt owed, the cancellation of any obligation to pay the debt, Matthew 18:27, 32.

Forgiveness (**aphiemi**) means to send forth, to send away, to cancel. The Greek term is made up of two words (**apo**, meaning “from,” and **hiemi**, meaning “to send”). Forgiveness means to remove, to send away. The same term is used of divine and human forgiveness of another person.

Read some of the Scripture passages which speak of forgiveness and place the words “lift up and carry away” in the place of the word “forgive.” See how beautiful it is. Check such passages as Ephesians 4:32 and I John 1:9. Keep that concept in mind as Bible teaching on forgiveness is discussed below.

## II. NEED FOR FORGIVENESS

**A. Offenses will arise between people.** Jesus said, **“It is impossible but that offences will come”** (Luke 17:1). Some offenses are caused by an act or word prompted by an evil heart and out of a malicious spirit. Other offenses arise in a spirit of good intentions and with no intent to do wrong. Regardless of how they arrive, offenses are always serious and should be dealt with without delay.

**B. Offenses are viewed as very serious before God.** Jesus said death is better than being an offense: **“Woe unto him, through whom they (offenses) come! It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones”** (Luke 17 1, 2). God views offenses more seriously than man views them. God said death is preferable. What a solemn thought!

**C. Offenses must be guarded against.** There are two guidelines which will keep offenses under control. (1) Do not be offensive. (2) Do not take offense against another. The old adage, “It takes two to fight,” is true in the matter of offense. No one can offend the man who refuses to take an offense.

An offense is commonly the result of injured pride. Pride in the flesh is contrary to humility in the spirit. An offense is an indication, therefore, that one or both of the parties involved are out of the will of God.

## III. THE SPIRIT OF FORGIVENESS

God has given several principles in the Bible to guide His children in the grace of forgiving. Man's forgiveness of man is a reflection of God's forgiveness of man. That is why the apostle Paul commanded the Ephesians to be **“kind . . . , tenderhearted, forgiving one another, EVEN AS God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you”** (Ephesians 4:32). The Christian is to

forgive “even as” God has forgiven.

**A. Forgive instantly.** How long did it take God to forgive you when you came to Him in repentance and faith? He forgave you instantly. How long should you wait to forgive a brother a real or imagined wrong? You must forgive instantly.

Jesus said, "Take heed to, yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him," Luke 17:3. Give no time for injured pride to fester and create a worse situation. Practice immediate forgiveness.

**B. Forgive repeatedly.**

How many times have you come to God to ask for His forgiveness and cleansing of a wrong? You probably lost count long ago. Then do not keep a count of how many times you must forgive another person.

Jesus said that forgiving the same person seven times in one day is not expecting too much from a Christian (Luke 17:3, 4). He further taught that forgiveness is not to be limited (“**until seven times**”); it is to be totally unlimited (“**until seventy times seven**”). See Matthew 18:21, 22 for His words. Forgive and keep on forgiving, just as God has forgiven you.

**C. Forgive as a Christian.** There are five guidelines which the Christian should follow in settling differences. They are given of God. To fail to follow them would be sin. To follow them is to walk the right way in getting wrongs righted.

Consider the five principles for Christian forgiveness (Matthew 18:15-24). (1) Seek reconciliation privately. “**If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone**” (verse 15). There is no need to spread a problem unnecessarily and create other problems thereby.

(2) Seek reconciliation persistently. “**But if he will not hear thee! then take with thee one or two more. . . . And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church**” (verses 16, 17). Do not be content with a first effort. Keep on seeking some way to make things right. Persist in your effort for reconciliation.

(3) Seek reconciliation solemnly. More is involved than your feelings. The body of Christ is divided. The ministry of the church is at stake. Jesus said of the offender, “**If he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican,**” verse 17.

(4) Seek reconciliation reverently. The binding and loosing by believers on earth must be in agreement with the binding and loosing which God has decreed in heaven. Relationship between Christians is a matter in which heaven is involved. Be reverent in establishing and maintaining those

relations.

(5) Seek reconciliation before worship. Differences between brethren so affect their relationship with God that no one should seek to worship God if there are offenses which separate him from his brethren (Matthew 5:23, 24).

#### IV. IMPERATIVE OF FORGIVENESS

You must forgive if you would be forgiven! That truth is taught by precept and parable. The precept is recorded in Matthew 6:12, 14, 15, while the parable is recorded in Matthew 18:21-35. Therein is established the imperative of a forgiving spirit.

The fifth petition of the Model Prayer is expressed in these words: **“And, forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,”** Matthew 6:12. There are a total of seven petitions in that prayer. Jesus chose the fifth as the only one upon which to expand by discussion. He said. **“For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses,”** Matthew 6:14, 15. Jesus expanded that fifth petition because He knew it was so contrary to man's carnal nature and because it was so essential to a right relationship with God and Christian brethren.

The precept is that one must be forgiving if he wants to receive forgiveness. He must forgive other people if he wants God to forgive him. That precept applies to believers today as well as to the earliest disciples of Jesus.

The parable illustrates the seriousness of non-forgiveness. A man who owed a debt so large it was impossible to pay was freely forgiven the obligation. He went to a fellowman who owed him a debt so small it was a mere trifle, but he refused to forgive the obligation. He was called to account for the great debt he owed.

There is no question what Jesus is saying. He states it distinctly. **“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. That underscores the seriousness of harboring a resentful and unforgiving spirit.

Why is man's forgiveness of another essential to God's forgiveness of him? Follow the reasoning in these three statements. (1) Christians are taught to forgive. Examine the teachings of Jesus in Luke 17:1-5. (2) Unforgiveness is a sin of disobedience toward God, since He has commanded Christians to be forgiving. (3) Unconfessed sin toward God hinders prayer. Psalm 66:18 reads, **“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the**

### **Lord will not hear me.”**

Therefore, a spirit of unforgiveness keeps one's prayers from being heard so that his request for personal forgiveness before God is to no avail. That is why Jesus said one must forgive in order to be forgiven.

Meaning must not be read into the parable which Jesus did not intend to put there. There is no teaching that God will withdraw His salvation from a Christian who has a bitter and unforgiving spirit. The one central truth of the parable is: **HE WHO WOULD BE FORGIVEN MUST BE FORGIVING.** That is to say, “Those that do not forgive their brother's trespasses, did never truly repent of their own, nor ever truly believe the gospel; and therefore that which is taken away is only what they seemed to have, Luke 8:18” — Matthew Henry. There is no teaching of a danger of “falling from grace” in the parable.

God is concerned with a forgiveness which is **“from your hearts”** (Matthew 18:35). Forgiveness is a spiritual matter. No one can excuse himself by saying, “I can forgive, but I cannot forget.” Of course one cannot forget. He can so forgive from the heart that he remembers without rancor. That is the kind of forgiveness which is truly from the heart.

## **V. PROCEDURE IN FORGIVENESS**

There is a distinct order to be followed in setting right a wrong against a brother. Two steps must be made in the order listed below.

**A. Get yourself right with God first.** Remember that forgiveness is a spiritual transaction. It is not done in terms of the flesh. True forgiveness is a work of God. In the life of the Christian, it is a reflection of the grace of God. It is a matter of the heart, not just the head. Start with prayer, personal cleansing, and drawing near to God before any approach is made to an offended brother.

**B. It is always “my move first.”** There are two types of offenses. (1) I may have offended a brother. (2) A brother may have offended me. It is always my move first whichever type of offense may create the problem.

Matthew 5:23, 24 teaches that if one comes to worship and there remembers that a brother has something against him, he must make the first move. He must leave his gift, go be reconciled to the brother, and return to worship. See how the “my move first” principle works when the subject is the offender?

Matthew 18:15 teaches that if one is offended by another, it is “my move first” again. **“If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault”** is the instruction of the Lord. See how the “my move first”

principle works when the subject is the offended one?

Never wait until the other party seeks reconciliation. If you are a child of God, seek reconciliation the moment awareness comes that there is a problem. Apply the “my move first” principle whether you are the offender or the offended. Never permit a difference to remain unreconciled so long as you can do anything to bridge the breach in fellowship.

It is selfish pride which says, “I would forgive him if he would come and ask me.” God says, “Do not wait for another to come. You go and make reconciliation.”

It is very serious for differences to lie between Christians. It means the body of Christ is divided. It means the Holy Spirit is grieved. It means prayer is hindered. It means the power of God will be withheld from the lives of the people of God.

Do not permit personal pride to keep you from seeking reconciliation with an offended person. Here is the principle to know: **“Be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you”** (Ephesians 4:32).