



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

### **Jesus Teaches About Forgiveness**

**Lesson Subject:** To encourage the believer to cultivate the spirit of forgiveness as Christ has forgiven us.

**L115. Date:** November 1973. **Text:** Luke 17:1-5; Matthew 18:15-18, 21-22.

**Topic:** Jesus: Teachings of; Forgiveness.

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

Therein lies the basis of all Bible teaching upon Christian forgiveness. The imperative is twofold: (1) God commands it, and (2) you have experienced it.

It is wonderful to be forgiven. It is almost as wonderful to be forgiving. The Bible is filled with the message of forgiveness. It is the only book of religion that teaches that God completely forgives sin. It is also the only book that sets forth the principles by which a Christian may fully and freely forgive others.

The Bible concept of forgiveness is wonderfully rich and full. God uses no fewer than seven different words—three in the Hebrews language of the Old Testament and four in the Greek language of the New Testament — to set forth the meaning of forgiveness.

The Bible speaks of forgiveness in two areas. First, it speaks of God's forgiving our trespasses against Him. Then, it speaks of our forgiving another's trespasses against us. Today's study deals with the teaching of Jesus on the second aspect of forgiveness. It is undergirded by the truth that man can be forgiving because he has been forgiven. A Christian does not forgive in his own strength but with the grace which God provides.

Today's study aims “to encourage the believer to cultivate the spirit of forgiveness as Christ has forgiven him.” As you study, ask the Holy Spirit to make you the kind of person who can forgive as God has forgiven.

## I. GUARD AGAINST OFFENDING, Luke 17:1-2.

**“It is impossible but that offences will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come,”** verse 1. Take those words of Jesus as a solemn warning. Situations will arise in which we will give or take offense. We are still finite creatures, waging a battle with the carnal nature. However honest our intentions, offences will still arise. Does that mean that we should take a careless attitude toward them? Absolutely not! Jesus pronounced a “woe” upon him who offends. His solemn warning is (that we must guard against offending).

Some people seem prone to misinterpret others and to take offense easily. Look upon those people with sympathy. It is an immature spirit which is easily offended. Pray for them that they might grow into spiritual maturity.

Offenses will arise in spite of our best intentions. Sometimes we cause an offense without even knowing it. It is imperative, therefore, that each believer be extra careful about his words, attitudes, and actions. Each should resolve that, God being his helper, he will not be the one by whom an occasion of offense arises.

The other side of the coin is important, too. While guarding against being an offense, be sure you do not take offence at the actions or attitudes of other believers. The Apostle Paul summarized each Christian's job as: **“Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,”** Ephesians 4:3.

It is always serious when an offense arises between brethren. Jesus pronounced a “woe” (an expression of grief or denunciation) upon a person who offends another. That is a very solemn word. Often it is used as a form of anathema or a warning of judgment. Jesus never used the term in a light or careless way, and He used it to speak against the person who causes an offense.

Almost any fate, even death, is preferable to being an offence. **“But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea,”** Matthew 18:6. Is that your attitude toward offences? It is, if you have the mind of Christ. Therefore, never take lightly a difference that arises between you and another person. It is serious!

The dread nature of offenses magnify the beauty of the spirit of forgiveness. Satan causes offenses to arise. God inspires forgiveness to follow. To hold an offense is to act like the devil. To forgive an offense is to

act like Christ.

## **II. BE READY TO FORGIVE, Luke 17:3-5; Matthew 18:21-22.**

Consider all the reasons why believers should be forgiving toward one another. They are members of the body of Christ. They are indwelt by the Spirit of God. They are under the control of the Lord Jesus, the Head of the body. Christ is not divided! How then can believers bear a hard and unforgiving spirit toward one another? They cannot, if they are in fellowship with Christ.

Consider this analogy of the body. Suppose your hand was rubbing your nose and accidentally slipped so that a fingernail scratched the face and caused pain. Would the head get angry at the hand because of the incident? Why not? They are each indwelt with the same spirit which causes mutual agreement and understanding. Why then do Christians, who are each indwelt with the Spirit of God, fall out with each other? It is contrary to nature. As a Christian, keep a readiness to forgive.

**Immediate forgiveness** — “. . . If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him,” Luke 17:3. Bear no grudge. Nurse no wounded feelings in self pity. Permit no delay in seeking reconciliation. If a brother trespass against you, tell him in a spirit of love, He will repent, you will forgive. Simple, is it not?

Most problems that arise in churches are caused by delayed forgiveness. Practice the grace of immediate forgiveness. When a grudge is borne, with forgiveness either unsought or unwanted, it becomes a dread affliction to the spirit. Attitudes of smoldering anger, animosity, envy, and selfishness are works of the flesh. Let the Holy Spirit control your life, and those will be noticeably absent. Any person who refuses to forgive immediately indicates that he is walking in the flesh and not in the Spirit.

**Repeated forgiveness** — It is relatively easy to forgive a person one time — his first offence. What if the offence is repeated? How far should forgiveness go? Jesus said, “**And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day . . . thou shalt forgive him,**” Luke 17:4. Is such a spirit not impossible? It is impossible in the flesh, but not in the spirit. Can a Christian forgive repeatedly like that? Yes! The Bible says, “. . . **Ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his,**” Romans 8:9. You can forgive, if you are a Christian.

“. . . **How oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?**” Jesus replied, “**I say not unto thee, Until seven times:**

**but, Until seventy times seven,”** Matthew 18:21-22. Jesus was not suggesting that you keep a record of offences against you, forgiving up to a certain point and then forgiving no more. He meant for us to forgive repeatedly without keeping a record of the injuries or weaknesses of others. Are you mature enough to do it? The teaching is for the spiritually mature. Is that you?

**Christian forgiveness** — The imperative is not simply that we be forgiving. It is that we forgive as a Christian. Is there a difference between forgiving as a Christian and the kind of forgiving a non-Christian would do? Definitely. Having heard the teaching of Jesus on forgiveness, the apostles responded, “. . . **Lord, increase our faith,**” Luke 17:5. Why did they make such a request at that time? They realized that a true spirit of forgiveness depended upon one's relationship with God. Forgiveness is not a work of the flesh. One is able to forgive only as he is related to God in Jesus Christ.

Many Christians have a problem at this point because they try to forgive as a natural man, not as a spiritual man. That is no better than the unsaved man. To forgive as a Christian means that God's Holy Spirit creates in you the true forgiving spirit which He manifested when He forgave your sins. God's kind of forgiveness takes away the sin, blots out the record of the offence, and remembers it no more against the offender. In like manner, the Christian is to forgive others “. . . **forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you,**” Ephesians 4:32. That demands increased faith.

**Conditional forgiveness** — God declares that you must have a forgiving spirit in order to receive the forgiveness of God. The principle is taught by precept (Matthew 6:12, 14-15; Mark 11:25-26; Luke 6:37) and by parable (Matthew 18:21-35). It seems like such a legalistic requirement; many Christians have difficulty accepting it. Jesus selected one petition from the Model Prayer and expanded upon it. “**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. Do you believe the words of Jesus? Then you must accept His teachings about conditional forgiveness.

Note that reference is not that a sinner must have a forgiving spirit in order to get saved. The teachings of Jesus on the subject is directed to believers. The Model Prayer is a prayer for believers. Jesus was teaching that you cannot have fellowship with God while out of fellowship with a fellow Christian. Does that mean that our forgiveness toward others is a work of merit which somehow obligates God to forgive us? Not at all. It means that an unforgiving spirit is a great sin before God. He will not

forgive a man until he is willing to let God take away the sin of unforgiveness, too.

Suppose a murderer came to God and said, “God, please forgive all my sins. Do it, however, with the understanding that I fully intend to go on committing murder.” Would he be forgiven? Suppose a harlot came before God and said, “God, please forgive all my sins, but understand that I make no confession or ask no forgiveness for my moral depravity. In fact, I plan to continue that kind of life.” Would she be forgiven? Suppose a person with an unforgiving spirit came before God and said, “God, please forgive me of all my sins. Understand, however, that old Mr. So-and-So has offended me and I have no intention of forgiving him” Would he be forgiven? Jesus answers, “No!”

Why? An unforgiving spirit is a sin before God just as is murder, moral depravity, or any other offence. In order to receive forgiveness, we must be willing for God to take away all our sin. **“If I regard (treasure up, hoard, cling to) iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me,”** Psalm 66:18. An unforgiving spirit is sin. To hold it in your heart closes the door of prayer against you until you are willing to confess it as a sin and to ask God's forgiveness.

### **III. SEEK RECONCILIATION, Matthew 18:15-19.**

**“It is impossible but that offences will come,”** Luke 17:1. In spite of our good intentions and diligent efforts, offences will occasionally arise. What should the believer do then? He should have no peace of mind until every effort has been made to effect forgiveness and reconciliation. Matthew 18:15-19 sets forth some very practical steps to be followed by a Christian in being reconciled to his brother.

**Seek reconciliation privately.** It is possible that two Christians can get together and settle all differences without anyone else ever knowing about the problem. There is no need to spread trouble by letting problems become public knowledge. Try to settle the matter “between thee and him alone,” verse 15. Here is the first principle: pray and talk to the brother privately. If reconciliation is made, stop there. If not, go the next step.

**Seek reconciliation persistently.** Sometimes differences cannot be worked out privately. If that is the case, do not stop. Select one or two spiritually minded brethren, whom both of you respect, and try to work out the problem with their prayers and counsel, verse 16. “No” is never the final answer when working out differences and making peace between brethren. The wise counsel of spiritually minded brethren is often the course to

reconciliation and peace.

Suppose three or four cannot work out the problem. Is it permissible to stop efforts there? Absolutely not. Call in more brethren to counsel: “. . . tell it to the church.” So long as there is a difference between you and a fellow Christian, the body of Christ is divided. Think how it would break a parent's heart to know two of his children were so angry at each other that they bore ill will and hatred toward each other. Think how concerned God must be when two of His children bear a bitter spirit toward each other. No stone must be left unturned in effecting reconciliation.

What if a brother refuses to take the counsel of the church and be truly reconciled? He is declaring by such an attitude that he does not truly know Jesus as his personal Savior. He is to be excluded from the fellowship of the church just as a heathen would be.

Behold how serious a sin is the spirit of unforgiveness. The church is not to pamper the feelings of men under such circumstances. She is to obey the commands of the Lord.

**Seek reconciliation reverently.** The church acts in the stead of God when she deals with the issue of reconciliation between brethren. Jesus declared, “. . . **Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven,**” verse 18. The authority of heaven is upon the church as she makes decisions and excludes the impenitent and obstinate from the fellowship of the saints. Therefore, all personal desires must be subservient to the leading of the Spirit. How prayerful the church should be in such matters.

**Seek reconciliation worshipfully.** No man can worship God aright while he has a spirit of discord with his brother. If you come to worship God and remember that you are not at peace with a Christian brother, go and be reconciled to your brother. Then return and worship God. Why? He who is “at outs” with a believer in Christ cannot be right with God. What a solemn statement. Ponder it carefully before your next prayer period or your next worship hour in your church.

“I can forgive, but I cannot forget.” “You have not truly forgiven until you have forgotten.” Have you heard those statements? Do you believe them to be true?

Remembering or forgetting have nothing to do with forgiveness. One can no more forget an occasion of offence than he can forget any other incident in his life. The important thing is not to forget, but to be able to remember without anger, ill will, or other evil passion. Such a spirit is possible only as you are possessed by the Holy Spirit and He loves and forgives through you.

The fleshly nature never produces a forgiving spirit. Only the Holy Spirit enables you to be truly forgiving. Ask God to make you capable of forgiving fully and freely. Let your forgiveness of others be in exact proportion to God's forgiveness of you. If so, you will forgive totally, repeatedly, and forever.

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