

## Christian Forgiveness

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

Without getting into the “debts vs. trespasses” argument too much, “debts” really is an accurate translation. However, the implication is not merely legal debts, but sins and offenses in general. It is a debt against what ought to be done, what is owed, as respect, honesty, kindness, etc.

It is interesting that the OT says much about God forgiving us, or us seeking his forgiveness, but most of the scriptures that tell us to forgive one another are in the NT. Certainly a lesson from God’s forgiveness in the OT is that we should treat others with forbearance, patience, and forgiveness, but the NT is much more explicit, even commanding us to forgive, and threatening us if we do not.

Mk. 11:25-26 – “And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any: that your Father also which is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses. But if ye do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

This is right after Jesus’ words about mountain-moving faith, and believing we have what we ask when we pray, but here it says that a major condition of effectual prayer is that we forgive people. This is quite serious. What are two effects of unforgiveness?

1. Our prayers will not be heard and will not be answered.
2. Mk. 11:26 says plainly that if we do not forgive, then God will not forgive us. In Mt. 6:12 we are to ask God to forgive us in the same way that we forgive others.

There are other consequences of unforgiveness, like ruining personal or family relationships, stirring up strife, and even physical ailments. Keeping hatred, resentment, bitterness, and anger bottled up inside us will eventually take a toll of stress on us that can bring sickness or other physical conditions. It can cost a job, friendships, or even a marriage. Like hatred, it is a poison of the soul and body.

How we are to forgive depends on the seriousness of the offense, and whether the offender is a fellow believer.

### How Serious the Offense

Some people are way too easily offended, and the “offenses” are so minor that they should be ashamed to be upset. They need to grow up and let small things roll off their backs.

What if the offense is more serious? Is it a personal offense against you alone? Does it put others at risk? Does it bring reproach on you, your family, or the church? Is it a criminal matter?

### Who is the Offender?

If the person who has wronged you is a fellow believer, Christ gives us definite ways to deal with the situation, even involving the church as a whole. If the offender is an unbeliever, it is different because they have no respect for a church decision, and we do not share a common moral framework for real resolution.

If the offender is an unbeliever, try to work it out as best you can. If they are unresponsive, forgive them in your heart and turn it over to God in prayer.

Just because you forgive them does not mean that they get off scot-free. If it is a criminal matter the state has an interest also. For example, just because you are able to forgive someone who has murdered a family member (like Erika Kirk forgave), doesn’t mean the murderer should not be tried, imprisoned, or even executed. The point of forgiveness is not a legal matter but internal, freeing them and you from the hatred and bitterness which would seem natural. Sometimes the legal system fails too, but in the end God will be the Judge. “Vengeance is mine, saith the LORD”.

If the offender is, or claims to be, a Christian, then Matthew 18 gives a definite procedure to be followed. The situation is not to be ignored, or allowed to grow or spread. Harboring personal animus and bitterness, or gossip, is worse than the temporary discomfort of dealing with the problem.

If a problem is fairly minor, as some rudeness, or an irritation of some sort (they are rubbing you the wrong way), you should simply forgive them in your heart, try to overlook their weakness. Pray for the grace not to think badly of them, and also pray for them to change and mature spiritually or socially.

### **What to do if a Christian brother has sinned against us, and it is something really serious**

This could include infidelity, lying, chronic gossip, sexual sins, thefts, extortion, brawling, wife-beating, etc.

Perhaps a common misconception of forgiveness is that we are just supposed to ignore an offense and try not to think about it, or act like it didn't happen. On the contrary, Jesus said that we should deal with it

Mt. 18:15-17 – “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican.”

There are distinct “steps” that we should go through to try to resolve the situation. First though, Ask yourself if this really is a big enough issue to confront the person on. Some things are so insignificant that they should just be ignored, and “suffered”. If you are not willing to go directly to confront the offender, maybe it is because it is such a small thing that you would feel petty. In that case it is your problem.

#### **a. Step 1 – Go to the brother (or sister) in private and discuss the matter.**

If you can deal with the problem between the two of you, there is no need to complicate things by making it public. At least give them the chance to recognize their offense and make it right.

#### **b. Step 2 – Take someone with you to confront the offender, still in a private way.**

If the case is genuinely significant and the person rejects the private attempt, then a second or third person will in effect be an arbitrator to try to make peace. Obviously this should be someone who can render impartial help. If you bring someone who is just one of your gossip-mates, the offender will think you are ganging up on them, and so resist. Troubles like this are often not one-sided, and it is possible that an impartial small group like this would help solve issues on both sides.

#### **c. Step 3 – Take it to the whole church, publicly.**

At this point it should be apparent that the person's offense is real, it is serious, and that they are stubbornly refusing either to admit fault or to seek a change. The public nature of this is to try to get them to “fess up” by the shame of public exposure. It should not be taken lightly because there is a risk of a church split – some unspiritual people will side with the guilty party out of favoritism, family loyalty, or their own antagonism toward the wronged party.

In all this procedure, the real purpose is not to embarrass or punish the person, but to get them to see the gravity of their offense, to seek forgiveness, and to change.

Unfortunately, even after public rebuke by the church, a person will often stubbornly refuse to change or even to admit wrong. In this case it proceeds to step 4.

#### **d. Step 4 - Excommunication**

If he refuses to hear the church, then he proves himself to be rebellious, and should be treated like the unbeliever that he is. It still doesn't mean that you are to hate him, but that you and the church agree that there are no grounds for spiritual fellowship while the matter is unsettled. Allowing the matter to go unaddressed would bring a reproach on the whole church. Even afterwards it can be an issue for prayer, that God would grant the person a change of heart, and eventual restoration to fellowship.

### **The parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt. 18:21-35)**

This parable reminds us of the great debt of sin that God freely forgave us. Being sons of God, we should want to be like God. His mercy should inspire us to show mercy. But if we refuse to forgive others, it is evidence that we are no really God's at all. Jesus said freely ye have received, freely give. This is especially true of forgiveness.

There is a contrast between the seriousness of our sins (against a holy God) as being “ten thousand talents”, and the relative insignificance of men’s sins against us (“a hundred pence”).

This is also a confirmation of Mk. 11:26 – If we do not forgive men, then God will not forgive us. Is someone’s offense against you really worth your rejection by God? Your unforgiveness is proving you to be a counterfeit Christian. It is the sign of an unregenerate heart – you may call yourself a Christian, but your pride and hard heart give the lie to your confession.

Besides Christ’s direct teachings above, Paul has two very significant admonitions to forgive.

Eph. 4:25-32 – “Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another. Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: Neither give place to the devil. Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth. Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

Unforgiveness in the body of Christ is giving place to the devil, and it grieves the Holy Spirit of God. Jesus said we would be recognized in the world by our love for one another. They certainly won’t see that if we are torn by dissension and unforgiving attitudes.

Col. 3:12-14 – “Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.”

Quarrels are not uncommon, but they are to be dealt with in Christian love, forbearance, and forgiveness. To continue in unforgiveness is to deny the faith.

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