

## Why Forgive?



### Sabbath Afternoon

**MEMORY TEXT:** “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Colossians 3:13).

**O**UR WORLD is filled with hurt and offended people. After all, who has not—however inadvertently—offended or hurt someone, oftentimes those whom they love the most? Even more important, who has not been hurt, or offended, even by those whom they love the most?

It is one of the sad facts of life that it is easy to offend; it is even easier to be offended. What’s not so easy is to forgive. If only forgiveness came as easy as offense. What a better world it would be.

This week we look at the question of forgiving others. We look at reasons why we should forgive, especially in light of Christ having forgiven us. Jesus told some pretty straightforward parables about the importance of forgiving others. It has, literally, eternal consequences and is an essential part of what it means to be a Christian.

Let’s see if we can come to a better understanding of this important, if not always easy to apply, fundamental teaching of our faith.

**THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:** What is forgiveness? Just because Jesus forgave us, why should we forgive others? What are the practical benefits of forgiveness? How can we forgive those who have hurt us? What is the essential element of unfairness in forgiveness? How can we balance personal forgiveness with the need for legal and civil justice?

\*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, June 7.

### THE FORGIVENESS FACTOR.

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

**O**ne of the most crucial and foundational aspects of the Christian faith deals with forgiveness. Our religion is nothing if, indeed, there is no forgiveness.

First and foremost, of course, it involves God’s forgiveness of us, without which we would be no better off than the beasts. In fact, without the promises that come with this forgiveness, we would be worse off than the beasts, because, unlike us, they have no concept of transcendence, of eternity, and of the chasm between what we are and what we long for. Humans do, and thus, without the promise of eternity that comes with forgiveness, it would be easier to be a chicken, because, even without forgiveness, chickens do not live in hopelessness; in contrast, humans, without divine forgiveness, do.

An unforgiving Christian is as much of an oxymoron as an atheistic Christian or a round square. As Christians, we must forgive; our religion demands it. Of course, that’s not always easy. Sometimes we have been so thoroughly hurt, so unfairly treated, so grossly misused and misjudged that forgiveness seems impossible, if not outrageously unfair and unjust.

And yet, there is inherent in the concept of forgiveness a sense of unfairness and injustice. To forgive someone something is not to hold that individual accountable for what he or she should be held accountable for; it is not to bear offense for what is offensive. You don’t forgive someone for giving you money, fixing your flat tire, or helping your mother cross a busy street. You forgive them when they insult you, when they cheat you, when they hurt you or someone you love. True forgiveness is often before restitution, prior to amends. You forgive, whether or not the offense is, or ever could be, rectified by the offender. This isn’t fairness, this isn’t justice—this is forgiveness. If we demanded fairness and justice in every aspect of our lives, we could never forgive or, for that matter, be forgiven.

**Why does, or should, a Christian forgive? Look at the text for today. How does it help us understand why we should forgive others? Christ forgave us; that’s fine. But why should we, then, forgive others? What does one have to do with the other?**

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WHY FORGIVE?

Look up the following texts regarding forgiveness. Next to each one, write down any reason you can find from it that would help us understand why we should forgive others:

Matt. 6:14 \_\_\_\_\_

Mark 11:25 \_\_\_\_\_

Luke 6:37 \_\_\_\_\_

Luke 17:3 \_\_\_\_\_

Luke 23:34 \_\_\_\_\_

Col. 3:13 \_\_\_\_\_

We can find in the Bible numerous reasons to forgive. We are commanded to; Jesus, as our example, forgave; we are even told that if we don't forgive others, we ourselves don't deserve to be forgiven by God.

Yet, none of this goes to the root of the question, Why forgive others? We need to be forgiven by a God in order to be spared condemnation at the end of the age; that's clear. But what purpose does God have in wanting us to forgive others? What reasons exist for God's asking us to do something that at times can be very hard?

Perhaps, by forgiving, we help ourselves; we get free from anger and rage and hatred that can destroy our lives. By forgiving, we are manifesting the character of God to the others; in short, we are a witness to the world of the kind of God we serve. By forgiving, we help break the cycle of hatred, revenge, and often violence that does so much damage to the world. In other words, by forgiving, we help make the world a better place. Imagine what this planet would be like if everyone learned to forgive everyone else.

Thus, besides all the spiritual aspects involved in the forgiveness of others, there is (as is often the case) a very down-to-earth practical element, as well.

Look at the world around us today. How much pain and suffering can you see that has resulted directly from a lack of forgiveness? Make a list of either international conflicts, domestic conflicts, or personal conflicts and violence you can trace directly back to one side's unwillingness to forgive the other.

HOW TO FORGIVE.

"To be a Christian means to forgive the inexcusable, because God has forgiven the inexcusable in you."

—C. S. Lewis

Of course, it's one thing to say that we should forgive; it's another to do it. Many people have suffered terrible indignities by those who have shown no remorse or sorrow for what they have done. As Christians, we are to forgive, but many times that isn't easy. How are we to learn to forgive?

There's only one answer: It's called grace. We can learn to forgive only by understanding how we, ourselves, have been forgiven. The grace that forgave us is the same grace that can lead us to forgive others.

Look up the following verses. What do they say about the Cross and what happened for us here that can help us understand how we can forgive others? Isa. 53:6; Rom. 4:5; 5:6-8; Eph. 3:7; 1 Tim. 1:15; Heb. 12:3.

God forgave us our sins, not because we were worthy, not because we deserved it, not because of anything that we could do to earn that forgiveness. It was purely by grace; unmerited favor that we, so unworthy, have been given the privilege of being called the "sons of God" (1 John 3:1).

In order to forgive us, Christ had to bear the sins of the world. God Himself, in the person of His Son, bore in Himself the penalty for all our iniquity. That's what it cost God to be able to forgive us so freely. It was the ultimate in unfairness.

Plus, we must remember that no matter who does what to us, we are all of the same sad ilk, different proportions of one lurid brew, brothers and sisters in sin, nothing else. Thus, the distance we have to cross to forgive others is almost nonexistent in contrast to the distance Christ, the Infinite God, had to cross in order to forgive us.

In the end, the only way we can learn to forgive others is to fall at the foot of the Cross and die to self. Only as self is broken can we be put back together in a way that will allow us to forgive. Only as we learn to partake of the grace bestowed upon us can we bestow grace on others. Only as we realize what we have been forgiven can we begin to forgive others.

What do you say to someone who is a Christian and yet says, "I have so much anger, so much bitterness, so much resentment against people. Please tell me how to get rid of it"?

## FORGIVING OUR ENEMIES.

Read Matthew 5:43-45.

The ideal of Christian forgiveness is illustrated in one of the classics that came out of World War II. In Ernest Gordon's amazing story, *Miracle on the River Kwai*, he tells how he was captured while escaping from Sumatra, after the fall of Singapore. With other prisoners of war, he was marched into the jungle to build the notorious bridge on the river Kwai. Here a miracle of grace took place. The Holy Spirit replaced hatred for their enemies with compassion, as is illustrated by this episode:

"We were shunted on to a siding for a lengthy stay. We found ourselves on the same track with several carloads of Japanese wounded. They were on their own and without medical care. . . .

"They were in a shocking state; I have never seen men filthier. Their uniforms were encrusted with mud, blood and excrement. Their wounds, sorely inflamed and full of pus, crawled with maggots. . . .

"The wounded men looked at us forlornly as they sat with their heads resting against the carriages waiting fatalistically for death. . . .

"Without a word, most of the officers in my section unbuckled their packs, took out part of their ration and a rag or two, and, with water canteens in their hands, went over to the Japanese train to help them. Our guards—tried to prevent us, bawling, 'No goodka! No goodka!' But we ignored them and knelt by the side of the enemy to give them food and water, to clean and—bind up their wounds, to smile and say a kind word. Grateful cries of 'Arigatto!' ('Thank you!') followed us when we left."—Ernest Gordon, *Miracle on the River Kwai* (London: Wm. Collins Sons & Co., Ltd., 1963), pp. 162, 163.

**What is Christ's antidote for a spirit of revenge? Matt. 5:38-42.**

Ernest Gordon regarded his comrades with wonder. Eighteen months ago they would have joined readily in the destruction of their captors had they fallen into their hands. "Now these same were dressing the enemy's wounds. We had experienced a moment of grace, there in those blood-stained railway cars. God had broken through the barriers of our prejudice and had given us the will to obey His command, 'Thou shalt love.' . . .

"God, we saw, was honouring us by allowing us to share in His labours . . . for the world He loves."—Ernest Gordon, pp. 163, 164.

## FORGIVENESS AND CIVIL JUSTICE.

Read 1 Peter 2:13, 14.

A man commits a terrible crime against a woman. The guilty person is caught and convicted. Before sentencing, the court wants to hear from the victim; depending upon what she says, his sentence can be lenient or very harsh. It's up to her.

Now, the victim is a Christian, who feels under the conviction of the Holy Spirit that she needs to forgive the person who committed this crime against her. And she has; through the grace of Christ working in her life, through her understanding of what she herself has been forgiven, and what that forgiveness cost, she has openly professed her forgiveness to the criminal.

**The question is, What does she say to the court? The person has committed a terrible crime. Does she plead for leniency? Does she ask that he be given the lightest sentence possible? Or does she seek the greatest possible punishment?**

**Look at this question from all possible angles: Perhaps, if he's given a lighter sentence, he'll be free again soon and do the same thing to someone else. Perhaps, if he's given a light sentence, others might be tempted by the light sentence to commit the same crime. Maybe he really deserves the worst possible punishment. Yet, if she forgives, shouldn't she want him to be punished as lightly as possible, or maybe not at all? How would you respond in a situation like this?**

The text for today makes it clear that rulers have their part, which involves punishing "evildoers." Of course, in one sense, we are all evildoers (Rom. 3:10-18). Yet, the crucial point to remember is that we need to make a distinction between the civil and the spiritual, between sin and crime, which are not always the same thing.

Maybe we are to forgive all things, but that doesn't necessarily mean all things don't come with legal consequences. They do. The difficult part for Christians is how to make the distinction. How do we forgive and yet, at the same time, respect the right and the need for civil law and punishment?

**Read Exodus 21:23-26. Keeping in mind the distinction between legal, civil codes, and spiritual truth, how do you square these with the concept of forgiveness?**

**FURTHER STUDY:** “The Saviour’s manner of dealing with Peter had a lesson for him and his brethren. Although Peter had denied his Lord, the love which Jesus bore him had never faltered. And as the apostle should take up the work of ministering the word to others, he was to meet the transgressor with patience, sympathy, and forgiving love. Remembering his own weakness and failure, he was to deal with the sheep and lambs committed to his care as tenderly as Christ had dealt with him.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 516.

“How many are today manifesting the same spirit. When the debtor pleaded with his lord for mercy, he had no true sense of the greatness of his debt. He did not realize his helplessness. He hoped to deliver himself. ‘Have patience with me,’ he said, ‘and I will pay thee all.’ So there are many who hope by their own works to merit God’s favor. They do not realize their helplessness. They do not accept the grace of God as a free gift, but are trying to build themselves up in self-righteousness. Their own hearts are not broken and humbled on account of sin, and they are exacting and unforgiving toward others. Their own sins against God, compared with their brother’s sins against them, are as ten thousand talents to one hundred pence—nearly one million to one; yet they dare to be unforgiving.”—Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, pp. 245–247.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. **Read Matthew 18:24-35. What’s the point of the story? How do we reconcile this with the concept of justification by faith alone? Does forgiving others make us worthy of being forgiven by God?**
2. **How do you understand the role of grace in forgiveness? Can you see a parallel between forgiveness and grace? Is not forgiveness a manifestation of grace?**
3. **What do you say to someone who said that, even as a Christian, it was impossible to forgive the person who, for instance, murdered and raped his or her daughter?**



### Against All Odds Nana Ngidi

When Nana Ngidi received permission to lead a Bible study group on the South African campus where she taught, she was told not to advance her personal beliefs. Nana made it a point to answer all religious questions from the Bible.

The group studied many topics, including the Second Coming and prophecies of Daniel and Revelation. When a student asked a question on Daniel 7:25 regarding changing the law of God, Nana could not answer without talking about the Sabbath. After the meeting, several students wanted to know more about the Sabbath and how to keep it.

Nana asked for and was eventually given permission to take her Bible study students off campus to attend Sabbath services in a nearby town. After the visit, however, the school president reprimanded her for teaching the students her own beliefs and undermining the school’s religious teachings. She was told to stop her Bible studies immediately and to send the Bible study students to the president’s office for questioning.

As she called each student, Nana wondered if any of them would stand up for what they believed. To her surprise, several who had not come regularly to the Bible study went to the president’s office, as well. The students were told that the Bible study group was disbanded and that Nana could no longer study or pray with them. A noted theologian was invited to speak at a campus seminar designed to “deprogram” the students regarding the Sabbath.

The theologian read verses regarding the ceremonial sabbaths of the Old Testament and explained that these sabbaths were no longer valid. He urged the students to forget the Sabbath “nonsense.” Although Nana was not allowed to speak at the meeting, one of her students stood and defended the Sabbath from the Bible. The theologian and staff members realized that the students knew what they believed. The meeting was dismissed.

Members of the Bible study group continued meeting without Nana. When they went home on vacation, they continued practicing their faith. Parents wrote to Nana telling of the change in their sons’ and daughters’ behavior.

Nana left the school, but some students keep in touch with her. One is now a student at Bethel (Adventist) College, in South Africa, and another wrote to encourage her to continue sharing her faith with others. And the colleague who caused Nana the most trouble at the school is now studying the Bible with her.

**Nana Ngidi is a teacher living in South Africa.**

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