

## 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).

One 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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**Key Text: Colossians 3:13.**

**Teachers Aim:**

1. To show that forgiveness is a two-way street.
2. To stress that forgiving can be difficult, especially when a terrible wrong has been done.
3. To show that, by God’s grace, we can forgive.

**Lesson Outline:**

**I. The Need to Forgive (Eph. 4:32).**

- A. Forgiveness is foundational to the Christian faith.
- B. We forgive one another, because Christ has forgiven us, and as Christians we are to be like Him.

**II. The Why and the How of Forgiving Others (Mark 11:25).**

- A. We forgive others to be free of anger and hatred.
- B. We forgive others to be witnesses to the world of the God we serve.
- C. We forgive others so we might break the cycle of hatred and violence.
- D. Understanding God’s forgiveness and what happened at the Cross teaches us how to forgive.

**III. Our Enemies, Civil Justice, and Forgiveness (1 Peter 2:13, 14).**

- A. Only God can replace hatred for an enemy with compassion.
- B. Forgiveness does not eliminate legal consequences for a crime.

**Summary:** When Jesus prayed, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), He was praying for those who brutally beat Him, spat on Him, rejected Him, and unjustly condemned Him to death. As our example, He showed us how to forgive.

**Commentary.**

**Why Forgive?**

Throughout this quarter’s Bible Study Guide, we have studied the role of forgiveness from a variety of perspectives. This lesson concentrates on one aspect that can be particularly trying—the need of forgiving those who have hurt us.

Sometimes it is easy to say “I forgive you.” It is not always easy, however, to put appropriate actions with those words. When someone

## 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.**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

has really hurt us, the natural tendency is to wish the worst for that person. Without the love of Christ in our hearts, there is no way we can truly forgive.

True forgiveness imitates God's forgiveness of our sins. It involves "outward self-restraint or forbearance in overt words or acts . . . also the habit of inwardly passing over the faults, wrongs, or weaknesses of others."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 212.

True forgiveness also involves a genuine concern for the other person. When Christ forgave His tormenters from the cross, He demonstrated this aspect of forgiveness. He also demonstrated it when He cleansed the temple. Of that occasion it is written that "it was not Christ's purpose to humiliate His opponents. He was not glad to see them in a hard place."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 594. He was acutely aware of the eternal peril their choices and actions had placed them in, and that awareness was painful to Him. He desired the best, even for His enemies.

A result of Christ's forgiveness of our sins is that we have the chance to grow "stronger in hope, in endurance, in character, and in the assurance of God's love."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 526. Christ's sacrifice "opened the way so that the most sinful, the most needy, the most oppressed and despised, may find access to the Father."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 113.

"The truly converted Christian never loses the sense of unworthiness that he experienced when he first surrendered his will to Christ. . . . [His] only safeguard is to remember the pit from which he was 'dugged' (Isa. 51:1; cf. Ps. 40:2), to place no confidence in self, and gladly to submit his will to the desires of God from day to day."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 290. Thus, we cannot truly forgive someone who has wronged us unless we daily submit to God's desires, just as Christ did while He lived on earth.

When we know about the unfathomable sacrifice Christ made to forgive our sins, we realize that "we ourselves owe everything to God's free grace," and a feeling of humility for the grace that has been extended to us should motivate us to "let this grace be revealed to others."—Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 250. We should be humbled by the price God paid for our redemption. "Forgiveness for men was purchased at infinite cost, whereas it costs men nothing, except the sacrifice of some personal pride, to forgive others."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 348.

Extending forgiveness to others affects God's forgiveness of us. "He who is unwilling to forgive others does not deserve to be forgiven. Furthermore, to extend forgiveness to him would be to condone his own unforgiving spirit. . . . Only when we are right with our fellow men can we be right with God."—Page 348.

We pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." If we want to be sincere about this prayer, we must not be holding any grudges against anyone.

## 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 that has been 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”?**

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

A forgiving spirit can make life more pleasant for everybody. Ellen White points out that “kind words are never lost. Jesus records them as if spoken to Himself. Sow the seeds of kindness, of love, and of tenderness, and they will blossom and bear fruit.”—Ellen G. White Comments, vol. 6, p. 1118. An unforgiving spirit, however, has the potential to cause devastation. Charles Stanley explains that “[an unforgiving spirit] is a poison capable of ruining not only your life, but the lives of those around you as well.”—Charles Stanley, “Preface,” *The Gift of*

## INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY

**Texts for Discovery: Matthew 5:38-48; Ephesians 4:29-32; Colossians 3:12-14; 1 Peter 2:21-25.**

1. Life isn’t fair. There are crimes and injustices perpetrated every day in every conceivable way, most of which we have no control over. What we do have control over is how we respond to those acts of injustice. God didn’t give us the responsibility of making life fair but of responding to injustice in a Christlike way. List a few of the world’s intractable problems to which Christian forgiveness *might* provide the beginning of a long-delayed solution.
2. Is forgiveness useful only in the realm of religion? Or is it a way to break down barriers between Christians and non-believers? Read Matthew 5:43-48. How do Christ’s teachings about human relationships begin building a better world? How much of an influence can Christian forgiveness have on society around us?
3. Some studies indicate that Christians live longer than people who have no faith. Part of that is because Christians have a support system, a kind of second family. Part of that is because they have faith in a power outside themselves. What part of a Christian’s longevity can be attributed to the fact that because of forgiveness Christians don’t have to struggle with guilt or lose sleep over wrongs done to them?
4. Forgiving is not the same as forgetting. The miracle of Christian forgiveness is that just as some people commit premeditated acts of cruelty and hatred, so Christians can deliberately adopt the same spirit of Jesus, who forgave those who crucified Him. No one will forget what Jesus went through to purchase our salvation. Can we ever forget the debt we owe to God for His forgiveness? Will our acts of forgiveness ever be forgotten?

## 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.

## TEACHERS COMMENTS

*Forgiveness* (Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987). An unforgiving spirit can affect not only the relationship you have with the person you refuse to forgive, but also the relationships you have with others (see p. 20). Such a bitter spirit can also affect the person who cherishes that feeling. "The person is left with a deep sense of emptiness, an inner sense that something is missing" (p. 22). Unresolved feelings of anger and bitterness can affect the health. An unforgiving spirit can also result in "provoking [those you refuse to forgive] to rashness and to sin."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 837.

A forgiving spirit translates itself into a spirit of tolerance. The Christian will not meet violence with violence. She or he will "'overcome evil with good' (Rom. 12:21) and 'heap coals of fire' upon the head of one who wrongs him (Prov. 25:21, 22). . . .

"The Christian will not fight for what he considers to be his rights. He will submit to injury rather than seek opportunity to inflict it."—Page 339.

## WITNESSING

Calvin had never forgiven his father for holding a gun to his mother's head while he and his sisters watched in horror. When he became an adult, Calvin discovered the secret that the only father he knew was not his biological father. Calvin became so resentful, that in order to avoid facing his adoptive father, he refused to attend his mother's funeral.

Is it possible that I cannot be saved unless I forgive someone who has wronged me? What does the Bible say? "But if [you] do not forgive, neither will your Father which is in heaven forgive your trespasses" (Mark 11:26). Heavy words. We need to take them seriously. Without the forgiveness of God, sin remains.

What lies in the unforgiving

heart? Resentment, bitterness, hostility, animosity. At the root of each one of these harmful feelings is anger, anger that has not been dealt with. Anger is a natural emotion. But when it is fostered, it can lead to any and all of the previously mentioned emotions, which can lead to hatred.

One can only hope that Calvin has finally found it in his heart to forgive the only father he knew. As we share the good news of salvation, let us tell others that they must forgive. But God will not leave us helpless. Not only will He forgive us, but He will give us the *power* to forgive one another. People who feel that they can't forgive need to know that, through the power of God, they *can* forgive, they *must* forgive.

**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?**

**LIFE-A PPLICATION APPROACH**

**Icebreaker:** React to this: "A cartoon in the *New Yorker* magazine showed an exasperated father saying to his prodigal son, 'This is the fourth time we've killed the fatted calf.' God does that over and over in our lifetime."—Bruce Larson, *Setting Men Free*. Quoted by Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart and 1,501 Other Stories*, p. 214.

how to forgive is by understanding how we, ourselves, have been forgiven. Thus, true forgiveness is found at the foot of the Cross. What really happened at the Cross that allows us to be forgiven, no matter what we have done? Once you understand this—that is, what happened at the Cross, and what it cost to forgive us—can you begin to understand how you can forgive others.

**Thought Questions:**

1. "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:5, NKJV). What endures when a person forgives? What endures when a person refuses to forgive? Which person needs more consolation, the one who forgives or the one who doesn't? Explain your answer.
2. Does the "stiff upper lip" approach work well when forgiving or being forgiven, or is a more transparent approach more productive? What insights do Jeremiah 31:3 and 2 Timothy 2:24, 25 provide?

**Application Questions:**

1. The greatest key to learning

**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?**