

## Matthew 18:23-35 Forgiveness

Our sinful human nature motivates us to treat others badly. From deeply depraved acts that cause pain, suffering, and death, down to small acts of neglect, thoughtlessness, and even unkind jokes—humans are constantly hurting one another. Even in the church, we suffer from words spoken in haste or anger, from judgments spoken with cruelty, from promises made and not kept.<sup>1</sup>

Because this is part of the human condition, we must forgive one another. We know that we are supposed to be like Jesus. He forgave his enemies; he forgave those who hurt him. We know that the Bible consistently and repeatedly calls us to extend forgiveness to those who cause us pain and sorrow.

Yet forgiving others is likely one of the most difficult responsibilities of the Christian life. Our sinful tendency is to hold on to those feelings of hurt and disappointment. Our tendency is to repay others for what they did to us.

The Christian life should be characterized by both repentance and forgiveness. When we sin, we must repent. When we are sinned against, we must forgive.

Many texts in the Bible remind us about the importance of forgiveness.

Exodus 34:6–7 ... *“The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, <sup>7</sup> keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, ...*

Matthew 6:12 *And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.*

Luke 6:37 ... *Forgive, and you will be forgiven.*

Luke 23:34 *Then Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” ...*

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Doriani, “Forgiveness: Jesus’ Plan For Healing And Reconciliation In The Church (Matthew 18:15–35),” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology Volume 13* 13, no. 3 (2009): 23.

Ephesians 4:32 *And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.*

Colossians 3:13 *bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.*

We could spend a long time studying what the Bible says about God's forgiveness of a sinner. But today I want to consider the sinner's forgiveness of another sinner. Because of human sinfulness, we have many opportunities to extend grace, mercy, and forgiveness to others. We should understand what the Bible says about this important responsibility.

## I. Definitions

- A. The basic definition of forgiveness is pardon, remission of sin, or the restoration of a relationship.

**Quote:** Forgiveness is an act in which an offender is pardoned and he is considered and treated as not guilty.<sup>2</sup>

- B. The NT uses three main words for forgiveness.<sup>3</sup>

1. One means "to deal graciously with" the offender (Lk 7:43; Eph 4:32; Col 2:13; 3:13).
2. Another means "to send away, to remit" the sin (Mt 6:12, 14–15; 9:2, 5–6).
3. And a third means "to loose, to let go, to release" the sin and the sinner.

Forgiveness is extending grace to an offender; letting the offense go; sending it away.

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<sup>2</sup> William H. Bates, "God's Forgiveness of Sin," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 79, no. 315 (1922): 263.

<sup>3</sup> Charles F. Pfeiffer, Howard Frederic Vos, and John Rea, *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* (Moody Press, 1975).

- C. Unforgiveness—failure to forgive; unwillingness to set aside past offenses

Refusing to forgive results in massive problems in the home, the church, and the world. Divorce, abuse, church splits, and the like all stem from, in part, an unwillingness to forgive.

- D. Failure/unwillingness to forgive often leads to feelings of bitterness. Bitterness is “hurt you hold on to”; resentment over past unfair or abusive treatment.

Unforgiveness and bitterness are both self-centered. They focus on one’s own condition—the hurt that I feel, the unfair treatment I received, my own disappointment and hurt feelings about acts against me.

Forgiveness focuses on God, not on the failures of others. We forgive others like God forgives us. One of the marks of Christlikeness and spiritual maturity is the willingness to forgive others—even when we don’t want to or don’t feel like it.

## II. Importance (basis) of forgiveness

- A. Forgiveness of others ultimately stems from the character and work of God. We forgive others because God forgives us.

God’s character is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy” (Ps 103:8). Because of God’s willingness to forgive, “he has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities” (Psalm 103:10).

*Nehemiah 9:17... You are God, Ready to pardon, Gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, Abundant in kindness, ...*

- B. Our forgiveness of others ultimately rests on God’s forgiveness of us. Jesus atoned for our sins on the cross; that atonement/sacrifice satisfied the wrath of God against us.
- C. And we can forgive others based on the same thing—God forgave us because of Jesus, and we forgive others because of Jesus.

1. We don't forgive others because they deserve it or have earned it or they ask for it.
  2. Just like salvation, forgiveness of others is an act of grace and mercy that the offender does not deserve. We experienced God's mercy and grace, and now we must extend mercy and grace one who has sinned against us.
- D. God calls us to forgive others in the following ways:
1. Forgive obediently.
    - a) We forgive others because God commands us to forgive those who hurt us.  
*Mr 11:25 ... if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses.*
    - b) Since we have been forgiven much, we must be willing to forgive much. A mark of a true believer is his readiness to forgive when wronged. In fact, we must forgive "as the Lord has forgiven [us]" (Col 3:13).
    - c) Failure to forgive is a mark of an unbeliever (Jn 20:23).
  2. Forgive sincerely—from the heart.  
*Mt 18:35 So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye **from your hearts** forgive not every one his brother their trespasses.*
  3. Forgive often—seventy times seven (Mt 18:21-22), i.e., continually, without limit.
  4. Forgive willingly.  
*Luke 17:3-4 ... If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent,' you shall forgive him."*

We must forgive when the offender repents and apologizes. Failure to forgive is sin.

5. Forgive to the degree that you have been forgiven.

Ephesians 4:32 *And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.*

God has extended mercy and grace to us, and we must extend that to others who offend us.

E. Evidence of forgiveness

1. When you truly forgive someone, you refuse to hold the sin against the offender. You may not actually forget the offense, but you will not allow it to affect your relationship, feelings, and choices. Forgiveness is treating the offender as if he had not offended you. That is perhaps the most difficult part.
2. When you can think on the wrong done to you and it not bother you any longer, then you know that you have truly forgiven.
3. Forgiveness does not necessarily mean that the relationship is fully repaired. You may forgive someone and decide that you no longer want to have a relationship with that person, or the relationship cannot be what it was. It might be wise not to continue certain relationships. For example:

In 1996, Travis Lewis broke into a home in Arkansas during a burglary and murdered 75-year-old Sally Snowden McKay. He was convicted and imprisoned. Years later, Sally's daughter, Martha McKay, chose **radical forgiveness**. She visited Lewis in prison, advocated for his parole, and after his 2018 release, hired him to work at the same historic house she had converted into a bed and breakfast. In March 2020, after being confronted over suspected theft, Lewis attacked and killed Martha inside that very home. He fled but drowned while trying to escape police.<sup>4</sup>

It might be rather foolish to hire the guy who murdered your mother. It's no virtue to allow yourself to be taken advantage of or swindled. We don't want to be gullible or easily cheated, just because we are forgiving, merciful, and gracious.

4. Forgiveness does not necessarily restore trust, at least, not right away. If someone has betrayed your trust, you may extend forgiveness, yet not trust that person again.
5. Failure to forgive others is a very bad sign.

Matthew 6:15 *But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*

For Jesus to say that God will not forgive those who will not forgive is to say that such people are not saved. Failure to forgive calls your Christian profession into question.

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<sup>4</sup> Don Keith, X (Twitter) post, 26 Feb 2026.

### III. Developing a forgiving spirit in your life

What are some principles to remember and steps to take to become more forgiving and less easily offended? These are a few things that we can work on to develop a forgiving spirit.

- A. Our goal is to be godly and Christ-like. Remember that God delights in showing mercy. God is gracious, kind, and forgiving. Think about how gracious Jesus was with the woman caught in adultery or the woman at the well. That's the same kind of grace and mercy we should extend to those who sin against us.
- B. Ask for forgiveness when you have offended/sinned against someone.
  - 1. Admit your sin—"I did this (whatever)." I.e., admit it, confess it; don't try to excuse it or defend it.
  - 2. Admit your guilt—"I am sorry; I apologize."
  - 3. Ask for forgiveness—"Will you forgive me?"
- C. Forgive generously.

*Matthew 18:21-22 Peter ... said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven."*

Note that he's talking about forgiving a "brother," that is, a fellow believer. This may be harder than forgiving an unbeliever. Unsaved people often don't care whether they sin against someone else, but believers should care. We know what we are doing when we offend someone else.

If you attend church long enough, a brother in Christ will sin against you; and when that happens, you must forgive.

*Colossians 3:13 ... bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.*

- D. How willing should we be to forgive? as much as Christ has forgiven us—that's a lot, every day, even serious sins.
- E. Some people question whether repentance is necessary before we extend forgiveness. Note the following verses:

*Matthew 5:43-45 I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.*

*Lu 23:34 Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. ...*

*Ac 7:60 And [Stephen] kneeled down, and cried with a loud voice, Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. ...*

Nothing in these texts that suggest we have to wait until the offender repents or apologizes to forgive him/her. In fact, under many conditions, those who sin against us will not apologize or repent.

The Bible tells us to confront the guilty person with the goal that he would repent—"Go and tell him his fault" (Mt 18:15). Ideally, the offender should repent and apologize. "If you brother trespasses against you, rebuke him; if he repents, forgive him" (Lk 17:3). Hopefully, when confronted by sin, the individual will repent—cf. David—"thou art the man."

But even if the person does not repent, you can still forgive. You can have a forgiving spirit. You must forgive if the offender repents, and you should have a forgiving spirit if he does not repent.

When we forgive others, we are not endorsing their character or conduct. The offender has done wrong; we are not denying that. We are not denying that the offender caused great pain and suffering. But in forgiveness, we are showing Christ-like grace and mercy. We are willing to release the person from our claims against him. And we do this for Christ's sake, not because the offender deserves it.

F. Forgive as you have been forgiven.

Imagine if God forgave you to the extent that you forgive others. Some of us would be in deep trouble if God forgave us like we forgive others.

Mt 6:12 *And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors.*

Because we have been forgiven much, we should be willing to forgive much.

**Quote:** He who cannot or does not forgive others, breaks down the bridge over which he himself must pass, for everyone has need to be forgiven.<sup>5</sup>

G. Don't base forgiveness on your feelings. You don't have to *feel* merciful and gracious to forgive. Forgive no matter how you feel about the other person or his/her offense. Forgiveness is a choice, not a feeling. Choose to forgive. If you can't do it, ask God to help you.

H. Remember that forgiveness is a command. When others repent, we must forgive, even if they sin against us repeatedly.

I. Refuse to keep a record of wrongs.

1 Corinthians 13:5 [*Love*] ... ***thinks no evil***; (ου λογίζεται το κακον)

Literally, love does not take evil into account; does not count up or weigh evil; does not meditate on evil.

Love prevents us from bringing up past offenses that you've already forgiven. Refuse to use someone's past failure as a means of gaining advantage or paying back a hurt. Even if you cannot *forget* a past offense, at least refuse to bring it up and use it against the offender.

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<sup>5</sup> William H. Bates, "God's Forgiveness of Sin," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 79, no. 315 (1922): 264.

- J. Avoid being overly sensitive and easily offended. Try to develop a “thick skin” whereby you overlook/ignore minor slights and frictions.

**Illus.:** Sometimes how people behave reminds me of little kids—“He looked at me!!”

Proverbs 19:11 *The discretion of a man makes him slow to anger, And his glory is to overlook a transgression.*

We must develop patience toward others; be slow to anger and try to overlook offenses.

I would guess that most of the offenses against us are usually very minor matters, and we should try to overlook them. We probably annoy others; we are impolite and neglect others. What we complain about in others is often true of ourselves. So show a little humility and grace.

- K. Forgiveness may not necessarily restore a relationship completely.
1. If someone murdered your mother, you might not trust that person even if you forgave him.
  2. If someone has gossiped about you or spread ugly rumors about you, you might not want to tell that person your deepest secrets.
  3. Ideally, forgiveness would re-set a relationship and restore it to where it was before the offense. But practically speaking, because of our sinful human nature, a total re-set or restoration may be impossible. We have to deal with reality, and sometimes the relationship will not return to what it once was.
  4. Ideally, a relationship should be better after forgiveness and restoration, but it may not be as good as it once was. Some sins have long-lasting results.

5. Forgiveness doesn't mean that we ignore, neglect, or excuse bad behavior. Jesus was merciful to the woman caught in adultery, but also commanded her "Go and sin no more." Forgiveness does not necessarily remove the natural results of sin. A forgiven person will still reap what he sows (Gal 6:7-8). E.g., God did not allow Moses to enter the PL.

Anyone who has been sinned against knows how hard it is to forgive others. It's hard to let go of that hurt, to be gracious and merciful, and to forgive as we have been forgiven. But that's what God calls us to do—to pardon those who sin against us. Forgiveness is a moral obligation; we must extend grace and mercy to those who hurt us; we must forgive.

We all need forgiveness, and we all need to forgive others. We expect others to forgive us, and we must be forgiving of others.

Forgiveness of others for their faults against us is a command. This is one of the most difficult parts of the Christian life, but we must do it.

Eph 4:32 ... *[forgive] one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.*

Col 3:13 *bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.*

Perhaps you have experienced a hurt and are hanging on to it. You are bitter about it and refuse to forgive. Maybe you are tired of forgiving. That is a very unhealthy and unspiritual condition. The best thing to do is to give it to God; let him deal with it. The best thing to do is to release the sinner and extend pardon for the sin. God commands it, and it's in our best interests to develop a forgiving spirit.

Lu 6:37 ... *Forgive, and you will be forgiven.*

Mr 11:26 *But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.*