

# **Forgiveness**

By

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The heart of *forgiveness* is “*give*”. It is true, both of the English word, as well as the Greek. That fact suggests the nature of the concept. It is something God does for us, and we do for others as an act of grace, and not merit. As such, it has no meaning apart from the love of God. Without God, in an evolutionary world, the law of the jungle would prevail—“survival of the fittest.” In such a world, one could not afford to forgive. There might not be a second chance.

But, if God be the source of the concept of forgiveness, then we ought to find in Him the ultimate example of it. Unless we can, ourselves, experience God’s forgiveness, it is of little value to talk of “forgiving one another.”

First, however, we must understand the meaning of the word. What is it that God does for us, when He forgives us? And, how do we know we are forgiven?

## **FORGIVENESS DEFINED**

Basically, forgiveness implies a debt—something to be removed, or cancelled. In the so-called “Lord’s Prayer,” Jesus suggests, “*Forgive us our debts (obligations), as we forgive our debtors.*” (Of course, He was not talking about money.) The translation in modern versions—“trespasses”—is not correct. If we offend someone, we owe them something, if only an apology. A genuine apology constitutes a recognition of that obligation. Apart from such a recognition, forgiveness has no meaning. True sensitivity to an obligation, and acknowledgement of it, is properly responded to with forgiveness. This process of confession is what Paul is talking about to the Romans, when he says, “*Owe no man anything, but to love one another*” (Romans 13:8).

To understand the meaning of “forgiveness,” then, we must understand the “debt” aspect. There are two facets to the forgiving of debt, in the Biblical sense—grace and removal. The Greek words used for forgiveness, almost interchangeably, involve these two aspects. *Charidzomai* means, “to give freely.” It is the root of a number of additional words related to the flow of benevolence or kindness – “grace,” “kindness,” “thanksgiving,” and even, “joy.” It is the expression of a heart open to others, and caring about their well-being. The other word, *Aphiemi*, means, “to put away.” The Hebrew counterpart is *salach*—“to send away.”

As an act of grace, or benevolence, and not obligation, one cancels the debt of another. It is like tearing up an IOU. In the ancient world, that would have been significant in a material way, since it would nullify any right to vengeance (a legal right under many conditions). To forgive is to say, “I have no further claim against you.” We use the idea of claim, or obligation, commonly, in such expressions as, “you owe an apology.” When forgiveness is extended, that obligation is removed. If the apology is not forthcoming, the debt remains.

## **GOD’S FORGIVENESS**

Now, in view of this concept of forgiveness and debt, what is it that we owe God? What is it that must be forgiven? What is the debt? It was God, after all, who elected to create this world, and its inhabitants. On what basis does He have a complaint against us? Further, it was the original pair that engendered God’s disfavor through their rebel act. The human predicament of moral and physical inadequacy was, according to God’s own Word, the direct result of this episode or process. The entire race, according to the Bible, suffered a malaise, which predisposed every human being to weakness in the flesh. So, why, then, are we chargeable to God for our offenses? This question must be resolved before we can understand the meaning of His forgiveness.

First, as to the reason why God created the world and its inhabitants. It is, of course, presumptuous for us to make any absolute statements. In some respects we can only speculate, because the Bible does not give us clear statements about the matter. God is not required to explain, or justify, His actions. Many times, our efforts to justify Him are clumsy, and inept (to say nothing of inaccurate). But there is something that keeps persistently emerging in our questioning about this matter—humans are somehow very significant. Only in certain aberrational states of mind does one seriously think otherwise. This deep seated sense of significance simply will not go away. Whatever we may say, or think, we cannot shake the inner conviction that human beings are a special product of God, and that they have a meaning and purpose far beyond the animal realm. Probably, the reason this feeling persists, is that God left His stamp on us, and we will never get away from it. Especially, as persons who have received His spirit, we know, instinctively, that we are somehow an extension of God's Being.

In a certain sense, the very nature of God implies creation. It is not that God, at a given point in time, decided to "make something." It is rather that His very Being must project itself in creativity. Glory that is not shared is less glorious. So, to ask why God created us, is really begging the question. How could He be truly God, and not reproduce something of Himself?

But did God really do us a disservice, given the human predicament? In a certain sense, as essentially spirit beings, we are an extension of God's Spirit. God breathed His breath (*Nishema*) into the clay that that was Adam, and Adam became "a living soul." He partook of the Divine quality of eternal, spirit life. But, the external vessel that housed the Spirit, became corrupted with mortality and weakness, in a process of disobedience, wherein the creature elected to act independently of the Creator. In this choice, the Spirit-ties with God were severed. However, restoration was immediately provided for. Thus, while it is true that we are involuntarily consigned to a weak and mortal body, the choice to retain spirit-ties with God is open to every individual. And, the mortal vessel is only transient—to be replaced by a glorified body in a relatively short space of time.

The sacrifice of Christ effected the restoration of spirit life for everyone who will receive it. Thus, no one need be cut off from God because of the rebel act of the original creature.

It was not a single episode that severed the union between God and man, but the assumption that the "created" could function independently of the Creator. Originally, the created partook of the nature of the Creator—that is, possessed His Spirit life, which was timeless in nature. But that quality of eternal life did not include infallibility, or perfection. The creature possessed God's quality of life, but not His deity. If indeed, the created partook of the nature of God, it was nevertheless, not God, Himself.

When Adam and Eve made a decision contrary to God, they exercised the God-like, and God-given quality of free will. However, while they were free to make the choice, they were not free of the consequences of the choice. In the decision to defy the express will of God, they forfeited the eternal quality of life, since God could not allow eternal discord in His Kingdom. The warning had been clear. To disobey would bring death. The warning was ignored, and mortality followed. Bereft now of eternal life, Adam and Eve could only procreate mortal children. It was the forfeiture of Spirit life that has produced the quality of weakness in the race. It is not that Adam and Eve transmitted immorality to their offspring, but rather mortality—a fleshly vessel, subject to decadence and death.

The consequences of the carelessness of the first humans, have placed the race of mankind in extremely difficult circumstances. Life is constantly a struggle, but the presence of the Spirit of God within us gives us the capacity to cope with the earthly milieu and still retain our oneness with God.

Jesus Himself had to do this, and we possess the same Spirit in ourselves. “*As He is, so are we in this world*” (1 John 4:17).

***But, if I had been there, I might not have made the same choice. I might have decided to obey, and be in harmony with God.***

Well, now you have that choice. Everyone who remains independent of God, has made the same choice Adam and Eve made—to ignore the essential tie to God. On the other hand, the way is open for anyone who will, to decide to recognize the tie with God. Each one, born on the earth, has that chance. At the moment one is conscious of the possibility of choice, one has only to decide to join with God by receiving His Spirit. Nothing is in the way of that choice. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross took care of that.

In Herod’s temple, (the duplicate of Solomon’s), near the place where Jesus was crucified, was a great curtain that separated the holy place from the “Holy of holies”—the inner sanctuary, where stood the ark of the covenant. This was the sacred place where the High Priest met God with the blood offering for the sins of the people. Only the High Priest could enter that sanctuary, and only once a year. At the moment of Jesus’ death, that great veil, a foot thick, split in two from the top to the bottom. The symbolism was obvious. Forever after, the way to God would be open to all.

So, in effect, what God did for us in forgiveness, was to eliminate the claim against us, and thus, remove the barrier to our oneness with Him. “*And you, being dead in your sins, and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath He quickened together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses; blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross*” (Colossians. 2:13,14). So, the debt has been cancelled, and we have only to accept the reality of it. Thus, receiving God’s forgiveness is not so much a matter of emotion—feeling badly about our predicament, but an act of the will—accepting our position of oneness with Him, by receiving His Spirit.

***Well, shouldn’t we ever feel remorse over offending God?***

Sensitivity to offending God comes with our life with Him. It is proportionate to our appreciation of Him, and our sense of human weakness. Our relationship to Him is much like our relationship to others. There is the give and take of offense and forgiveness, depending on the closeness of the ties.

***But how do we know we are forgiven by God?***

The Bible gives the principle—“*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). The fulfillment of that promise is experienced in the sense of oneness, or “caring,” that we have with Him. That is, we want to be related to Him, and to have His favor. If we desire to be forgiven, the Spirit is working in us. The fact that we continue to care about Him, is the assurance of our forgiveness.

It is most important to remember that God’s forgiveness, in regard to the original offense, is not a response to feelings of remorse over the human predicament—something with which we had nothing to do—but rather a canceling of the debt incurred by the original parents, that all may again have free access to God. Since the right to recover harmony with God was immediately provided for, those who choose to function independently of God, do so as a private choice, and not as unwilling victims of a predicament which they inherited. The Apostle Paul indicates in his letter to the Romans, (Chapter 1) that those who reject God are without excuse, because the knowledge of Him is available to all, and the choice to ignore Him, a willful choice of evil over good.

***So then, God does not blame us for Adam’s sin?***

No, indeed. The answer to the original question of how God can charge us with offenses over which we had no control, is that He does *not* charge us with offenses over which we had not control. He rather offers us the right to the restoration of our original oneness with Him, simply by acknowledging our

dependence on Him, as spirit beings created in His image. We are all given the same choice that Adam and Eve had—to be in harmony with Him, or to function independently of Him. Without Him, there can be no eternal life. Thus, those who choose to reject Him, choose death. The same kind of choice is made by those who elect to disconnect life-support systems in the hospital. Death comes, not as a matter of punishment, but inevitable consequence.

For whatever reason, we came into existence as Spirit-beings, in oneness with God. That is our purpose and destiny. To accept that destiny, and receive His Spirit in us through Christ, is to enter into the fulfillment of ourselves. To seek fulfillment of the self apart from God, would be like the body seeking fulfillment without the mind, or, in another sense, for a human being to mourn the fact that he cannot be human and canine at the same time.

***But, what of our continual fleshliness after salvation? What's the purpose of it?***

The introduction of decadence and corruption through Adam and Eve gives us continual reminders of our human condition. Rather than putting us in jeopardy with God, it serves to emphasize our need of Him. The constant confrontation with human weakness preserves for us the state of humiliation consistent with our dependence upon God. After we have accepted our restoration, the Spirit within us makes us sensitive to the offenses that are the constant symbols of our human weakness. Only then do we experience feelings of remorse for our actions in the flesh, which are, then, seen to be inconsistent with our Spirit-nature. So offenses and remorse are part of the ongoing relationship between the restored human and God. In this respect, the sense of remorse and the desire for forgiveness are assurances that the Spirit of God is indeed functioning within us.

## **HUMAN FORGIVENESS**

Now, as to our forgiveness of one another—the same fundamental principles apply. There is an expression of grace and an act of removal or cancellation of debt. If one has something against us, it must be removed, before there can be harmony. It is as important for the offended one to let the offender know of the offense, as it is for the lender to present the terms of a debt. When the debt is made known, the debtor must settle with the creditor. In the matter of forgiveness, the debtor acknowledges the offense, and offers an apology. The creditor receives the apology, if it is sincere, and offers forgiveness. The debt is cancelled. The offended has no further claim. The barrier to harmony is removed.

The forgiveness of an offense, however, is based upon grace, and not merit. It is only valid within the context of the love of God, and the ministry of His Spirit within. In fact, it is only His Spirit that makes forgiveness possible. Actually His Spirit forgives through the agency of our human vessel. In the human sense, we are no more obligated to forgive an offense than a creditor is obligated to cancel a just debt.

***But what if one offends over and over?***

Jesus set the standard—*“How often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him, until seven times (the legal requirement)? I say unto you, not until seven times seven, but seventy times seven, if he repent”* (Matthew 18:21,22). This is not possible in the human frame of quid pro quo—*“This for that,”* or even in the Old Testament standard of *“eye for eye.”* True forgiveness comes only in the expression of the Spirit of Christ within—*“Who can forgive sins but God only”* (Mark 2:7). Thus the very capacity to say, *“I forgive you,”* is from the Spirit of Christ within.

Of course, a most important condition is the word, *“repent.”* God requires confession before He grants forgiveness. *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins”* (1 John 1:9). To offer forgiveness to one who feels no obligation, only magnifies the offense. If one does not recognize the

obligation, forgiveness is meaningless. One may choose to overlook an offense without the participation of the offender, but we can only forgive the offense when the offender acknowledges the debt and asks for forgiveness. If, for example, we would say to someone, "I have forgiven you the hundred dollars you owe me," and that one does not believe he owes the hundred dollars, our forgiveness of the debt is meaningless. There is a difference between overlooking an offense and forgiving an offense.

When forgiveness is extended on earth, it is certified in heaven. "*Whosoever sins ye remit, (forgive) shall be remitted*" (John 20:23). This was spoken to the disciples in general, not only to the apostles. But on the other hand, "*Whosoever sins ye retain (do not forgive) shall be retained.*" If an apology is not forthcoming, or is insincere, there is no forgiveness possible and the offense remains on record.

But Jesus said, while He was being nailed to the cross, "*Father forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34).

Ah yes, but these were unbelievers. Different rules apply. Here it is a matter of God sharing His grace with a pagan world. There is no issue of growth or humility, but merely the extending of grace to a lost world.

***But if one does not think one has offended, then what?***

In every offense, there is the offender and the offended. The degree of the offense can only be measured by the offended one. Whether one ought to be offended, or not, is beside the point. Who knows the sensitivities of another's mind? The place of the offender is humility. The acceptance of the judgment of the offended requires openness, as well as the recognition that one is not above giving offense, even unknowingly. It is also an awareness of the worth of an individual. To trivialize another's distress is to trivialize the worth of that one.

So, the proper attitude of the offended is, "You have caused me distress, but if you are willing to recognize that, I am ready to forgive you." The proper attitude of the offender is, "Whether or not you are justified in feeling offended is not mine to judge. If I have caused you distress, I ask forgiveness."

***And if the offender still does not accept the fact of the offense?***

Jesus provided the proper recourse. If one goes to the offender, and the offender does not accept the fact of the offense, then Jesus said to take another with you, and if the offense is still not accepted, to take it before the larger body; and if the offender still does not respond, Jesus says to let him be shunned. (Matthew 18:15-17)

***But I am not always sure I've really forgiven.***

True forgiveness is an act of the Spirit of Christ within us. The mind does not always fully participate in that act. The mind involves the emotions as well as the reason. It is not too difficult for the human mind to handle unintentional offenses, but where one has intended us harm, that is another matter. The mind does not always see the reason for forgiveness, nor does it always feel genuinely forgiving. One may struggle with guilt feelings over this dilemma. The answer to the problem is that the Spirit of Christ within does not engage in emotional speculations—"Am I really willing to forgive?" When the conditions of forgiveness are there, the Spirit of Christ within us extends forgiveness. Do not speculate about the matter. By the same token, one should not speculate about how one could bear certain pains or problems. The Spirit does not give us grace to think about tomorrow's ills. If the ills come, then the grace will be there to handle them. The Spirit in us knows the genuineness of another's apology. When the conditions of forgiveness are truly there, the Spirit in us will truly forgive. Perhaps the reason one does not feel forgiving toward another is that a genuine attitude of penitence is not there.

So, neither human reason, nor human emotion, can be trusted in the matter of forgiveness. When the conditions of forgiveness have been met, the Spirit in us will forgive, in spite of ourselves. But, the consequences of offenses sometimes linger, long after forgiveness has been extended. For example, if a marriage partner has been unfaithful, one may genuinely forgive, but the restoration of affection and trust is another matter. Do not assume that lingering emotional or circumstantial difficulties indicate failure to forgive. If, for instance, one has entered into a business transaction with another, and the matter is in default, one may forgive the debt, but will be reluctant to enter into another transaction with the same party. So forgiveness eliminates the offenses, but not necessarily the consequences.

***But what about lingering bitterness or grudges?***

It is, of course, difficult to sort out the emotions—what is unwholesome bitterness, and what is merely a wound not healed as yet? Tender hearts scar easily. Perhaps the best test is whether or not one wishes ill to the forgiven party. It is one thing to prefer not to maintain close ties with one. It is quite another to be indifferent to the welfare of that one.

***But what about the statement, “I can forgive, but I never can forget.”***

In the first place, that is not a Biblical statement. In the second place, it is quite an oversimplification. The emotions are highly complex, and not easily classified. Offenses leave scars—often wreckage. Some things are better not forgotten. If one has been cheated by another, for instance, one can forgive, but one had better remember, so as not to be cheated again. Some circumstances will not ever allow one to forget. For instance, let us say that one has had too much to drink, gets into an automobile, and has an accident. In the accident, a friend, who is a passenger, is maimed and confined to a wheelchair. The driver of the car gives up drinking, asks forgiveness, and does everything in his power to make amends. Forgiveness is genuinely granted, but the wheelchair will be a constant reminder. Such remembrance need not be bitter, though it might be painful, both for offender and offended. Similarly, infidelity in marriage can leave scars that are lasting reminders. For this reason, divorce might be advisable, in the case of adultery, which has, in effect, already broken the contract, so to speak. Jesus allows this, in His discussion of the subject, in the Sermon on the Mount”.

In the “caring-consciousness” of the believer, remorse and pain are common. It is the very Spirit of Christ within us, that makes us sensitive to offenses—both our own and others.

It is very difficult to sort out human emotions. Failure to forget may not be failure to forgive. Sometimes scars are important reminders to offender and offended alike, that human relationships must be handled with sensitivity. In relating to another human being, we are not always aware of the psyche, or personality of that one—how easily they are hurt. Under certain conditions, careless comments can do great damage. And, we have no right to judge what ought, or ought not to hurt another. James said, “*The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity ... and it is set on fire of hell*” (James 3:6). Scars that are the result of offenses are important reminders of this.

***Well, I know I have sometimes hurt people badly, and I just can't forgive myself.***

Is it really that you aren't forgiving yourself, or that you are simply remorseful? The very attitude of remorse is the evidence that you have dealt with the matter. The record is clear before God, unless, of course, you have not made it right with the offended party.

But, as far as the feelings are concerned, the magnitude of the offense will determine the level of the remorse. It is of no value in the recovery of a situation to be eaten up with remorse. These things must be regarded as learning experiences, and put behind us. And, of course, undue remorse can have a negative effect, physically, psychologically, and spiritually. It even has a negative effect on the one who has been offended.

It should be observed, however, that if one has truly not forgiven oneself, it may indicate a measure of pride. People who have difficulty forgiving themselves, may also have difficulty forgiving others. Remember, forgiveness is a Divine response to genuine repentance. Part of true penitence is the humility of accepting forgiveness.

***But, what if one says one has forgiven you, but still keeps reminding you? Is that true forgiveness?***

Human emotions are complex and difficult to handle. It is hard to say what another person should feel, or how they should act. Obviously, it is not sound for one to keep reminding another of the offense, but whether or not the debt has been cancelled is another matter. Remember, forgiveness cancels the claim and clears the record of the offender, it does not eliminate the fallout. It does not necessarily change persons, or circumstances; nor does it remove scars, nor restore affection or trust. Those are another aspect of the matter. They should be dealt with, but on a different basis.

It is neither good judgment, nor good taste to keep reminding someone of an offense that has been forgiven. It is not pleasing to the Lord, and affects fellowship, but whether or not there has been true forgiveness is not ours to say. If one has cancelled a monetary debt, but keeps reminding the debtor of the matter, the debt is no less removed, but the creditor is acting in poor taste.

***But what can one do about it?***

It is most important to understand that God is the reference point to forgiveness, as He is its author. When we have offended someone, God expects us to make it right. *“If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift”* (Matthew 5:23,24). When we have genuinely acknowledged an offense to another, what they do about it is up to them. We have done our part. The record is clear before God. As far as the other party is concerned, God must deal with them. *“But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses”* (Matthew 6:15).

***But what can I do about negative feelings toward people who don't forgive, or forget?***

People's actions do sometimes cause barriers to friendship. We can not always help that. If others do not treat us right, it cannot help but affect friendship. Remember that we do not have to like the people we care about. Agape love, which God commands, has to do with “caring”—not with “liking”. Jesus cared about the Pharisees, but obviously did not like them. If people do not handle the matter of forgiveness properly, it will affect our feelings, but we can go on caring for them in the Biblical sense, whether or not we maintain friendship. Feelings belong to the realm of the mind, or flesh. They are never a reliable gauge of what is taking place in the spirit. The Spirit of Christ in us relates to others through us, in spite of our fluctuating feelings.

***I thought God said, “thy sins and iniquities will I remember no more.” Shouldn't we do the same?***

Certainly, if we can. But God can cope with human failure better than we. We are not talking here about what people ought to do, but how God judges them in matters of forgiveness and human relationships.

Perhaps it is well to make an effort to handle our relationships with others more carefully, and not to depend on the human capacity for forgiveness, to get us by.

***“And what about the unpardonable sin?”***

I presume you are referring to Jesus' statement—*“Whosoever blasphemeth the Holy Spirit hath never forgiveness in this life nor the next”* (Mark 3:29).

In the first place, Jesus was referring to the Pharisees, who had attributed His power to be from Satan. It was not a matter of questioning the source of the miracle. It was rather that, while acknowledging that Jesus had, indeed, done the miracle, they attributed His power to be from Satan.

But, in the second place, and more importantly, anyone who cares whether or not one has committed the “unpardonable sin,” gives evidence that one has not done so, else one would not care.

## **SUMMARY**

In summary, forgiveness on the part of God cancels the obligation of disobedience which separated the human from the Divine and restores the oneness of Spirit. The acceptance of that cancellation does not necessarily involve feelings of remorse, but an act of the will.

The forgiveness of God is a reality, when the conditions of acknowledgement are met, whether or not the mind has been able to comprehend that forgiveness. The debt between men and God has been cancelled in the sacrifice of Christ. Every human being on earth has the right to restoration if he elects to receive it, whatever his feelings may be.

The presence of the Spirit of Christ within us, however, does sensitize us to offenses against God, as out of harmony with our spirit nature and does bring a sense of remorse. This sense of remorse over offenses toward God and others is an indication of the Spirit of God within

In the forgiving of others, we are also involved in the cancellation of obligations. The Spirit of Christ in us responds in forgiveness to genuine apology. The obligation is cancelled, but consequences may remain. Barriers to fellowship may be removed, but healing of wounds may take time. Forgiveness is genuinely offered, but restoration of affection and trust is a different matter.

It is not for the offender to judge the offense. If the offended is distressed, the offender must accept that judgment, and offer apology. When the apology is genuine, the Spirit in us will extend forgiveness, whether or not the mind participates in that forgiveness. If the offender does not acknowledge the offense, the assistance of others in the body may be sought.

Communication is a key word in forgiveness. To merely overlook an offense (unless it is too trivial to affect anything), does not bring about—for either party—the proper lessons in humility and sensitivity, necessary for growth. Nor does it resolve the inner conflicts.